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To whom it may concern,

The information in this book comes from the Cahill vault, which means that *none* of it was meant for your eyes. Over the past 500 years, a number of exceedingly dangerous items have been placed in the vault for safekeeping—assassination orders, confession-filled diaries, treasure maps, and many other items that I know better than to list here. Documents that have sparked wars, incited revolutions, and led to the downfall of governments, kings, and empires.

It was *not* my idea to make this material public. I was given specific instructions by my former employer, William McIntyre, to protect the information in the vault. However, after recent tragic events, it looks like I'm taking orders from someone new—someone who believes that the Cahill Files are essential to the security of the Cahill family . . . and the world at large.

And so, the vault has been opened. Do with these stories what you will. But when you find yourself weighed down by the secrets and scandals that shaped history, just remember one thing: I told you so.

Clifford Riley

SILENT NIGHT

In the winter of 1914, there was a battle waging between two great powers in Europe. There was that world war, too, but Rupert wasn't concerned with that at the moment. No, his battle was being fought in the Davenport dining room, and his rival sat right across the table, wearing a military uniform with the bright star badge of a newly made second lieutenant. Rupert eyed that star like it was about to explode.

The enemy had the advantage at the moment, but Rupert was about to make his move.

The dining room at Southington, the Davenports' small castle in Essex, was a comfortable place for a war. The vaulted ceilings were gilded, and golden statues of women hung in the corners, silently playing their harps and lutes and panpipes for those seated. The walls were hung in rich tapestries and lush paintings depicting some of the greatest moments in family history — the crowning of King Louis XIV, Napoleon's victory at Austerlitz, the assassination of Peter III by Catherine the Great. And there, at the head of the room, behind where Father sat, was a portrait taller than Rupert and wider than his arms could reach. It was of a thin, hard-looking man in sixteenth-century garb who was hiding a dagger beneath his cloak.

Luke Cahill liked to keep a close eye on things, even if he'd been dead for over three hundred years.

"Tell us more about the Marne, darling," Mother said to Albert, reaching over to pat his arm but really taking the opportunity to see what her diamonds looked like in the light of the chandelier. Father didn't look up from the documents spread out next to his plate. He rarely paid attention to anyone during dinner, especially while preparing for a Lucian leadership council, but to Rupert's surprise, he nodded in agreement. "Let's hear about when they made you an officer," said Mother.

"Well," said Albert, with modesty so false that Rupert almost snorted. And yet he still listened, silently and with great attention. "The Germans thought that if they could get to Paris, they'd win the war in one fell swoop." With his right hand in a fist, Albert made a swooping motion like he was going to swim across the dining-room table. He spread his fingers. "They would fan out and catch us! Like foxes in traps! But we stopped them. I was there and so cool under pressure, they made me an officer."

Mother gave him a satisfied pat on the hand, and Father nodded again. “That’s very impressive,” said Father, finally looking up from his papers. Compliments from their father were about as rare as poor children getting ponies for Christmas, and Rupert felt a coil of jealousy begin to tighten around his stomach. But he forced himself to smile placidly. He had news of his own to share — a victory that would force his family to accept that he was the son to watch. Because while Albert might have the shiny star, Rupert was destined for greatness. It was something that he’d always known, deep down in the bones of his soul. And now, he had proof.

He cleared his throat. “Well, speaking of remaining cool under pressure, I —”

“Quiet, Rupert,” Mother scolded, shooting him a disapproving look. “Don’t interrupt your brother.”

Rupert sat back in his chair and crossed his arms. He didn’t understand what all the fuss was about. From what he gathered, Albert’s biggest accomplishment so far was managing not to die. He hadn’t demonstrated nearly the same cunning Rupert had during his most recent act of bravery.

“It’s all right, Mother,” Albert said. “I think it’s best to move on.” He closed his eyes dramatically. “There are some things I’d rather not remember.” He blinked and then gave Rupert an exaggerated smile. “What were you going to say, Rupe?”

Rupert ignored Albert’s patronizing tone.

“Well,” said Rupert, sitting up straighter. “I managed to get our exams postponed until after the Christmas holidays.” He beamed as he looked around the table, but no one reacted. “I, uh, gave all of the proctors a bit of food poisoning so we wouldn’t have to take them. It was brilliant. I got the idea from that book Grandfather left to me.” Rupert smiled expectantly. After years of being lectured at for not living up to his potential, he’d finally proved that he was a real Lucian — a cunning master of strategy and sabotage.

“*That’s* how you were ‘cool under pressure’?” Albert asked, raising one eyebrow.

“Of course,” Rupert said, looking to his parents for support. Rupert’s father shuffled his papers, and his mother dabbed her mouth with a napkin.

“Indeed.” Albert smirked. “Well, in that case, I suppose we are to commend you for your bravery.”

“I *was* brave,” Rupert said, narrowing his eyes. “If the proctors had found my stash of poisons, they might have —”

“Poisons?” Albert interrupted. “Rupert, no one uses poisons anymore. Nowadays, it’s all about steel and machinery. You’ll need to keep up with the times if you want to be any sort of help with the Clue hunt.”

Rupert was just about to tell Albert exactly what he thought about his stupid medal when their father cleared his throat. “I quite agree,” he said without looking up. Rupert felt his chest tighten, as if the three words had knocked the air out of him. He’d been so sure his father would be pleased with his scheme.

“Oh, and I forgot to mention,” Albert continued airily. “I saw a Madrigal.”

A chill swept through the already cool room, and despite the white-hot anger welling up inside him, Rupert shivered. Mother gave a little gasp, and Father looked up.

“I did,” said Albert. “At the Marne. He was tall, and in all black. He had a funny hat and a walking stick. You know there’ve been some rumors floating around that the Germans are actually being mobilized by one of the other branches. Which is really rather ridiculous, because who else but the Lucians would be able to handle an undertaking of that size and complexity? But that’s just what they were — rumors. No doubt the Madrigals are trying to sniff it out. How very like them to try to take advantage of a war.”

“We can talk about that further at the meeting,” said Father.

“Albert’s going to the meeting?” Rupert blurted before he had a chance to think. Neither he nor Albert had ever been allowed to attend the Lucian leadership council. But as soon as the words left his mouth, he regretted them.

“Yes, but don’t feel too bad about it, Rupe,” Albert said with false cheeriness. “Really, you’re lucky to be too young to worry about things like bombs and machine guns,” said Albert. “I say, I almost envy you for getting to stay at school, safe and sound, orchestrating your little pranks. If you keep it up, you might even manage to make yourself useful in a few years, although the war will be over by then, of course.”

When the war had started back in August, everyone thought it would be over quickly. The year 1914 would be marred by a blip of conflict, a scuffle deep in the belly of the Continent, and then the world would settle back into itself for 1915. But November was over and December had just swept in with the first brushes of gray snow, and the war still burned in red and muddy stripes all up and down Belgium and France, like a bad rash.

But Rupert wasn't scared of that. Not half as scared as he was of being left behind and shut out.

"I could go," said Rupert, before he quite knew what he was saying.

"What was that?" said Albert, lifting an eyebrow.

"I said, I could join up," Rupert said, a little louder. "I could go to war."

Mother pressed her lips together, and Albert tried to hold back a laughing choke. Father finally looked up from his papers, locking his eyes with Rupert's. Rupert squirmed.

"Rupert, darling, you're not serious," said Mother. Her mouth curled upward, making her look just the slightest bit amused.

"I am serious," he said, feeling a surge of anger blend with the hurt already curdling his stomach. "Albert thinks I can't do it, but I can. I could. I will."

"You will what?" said Albert. "Join His Majesty's armed forces?"

"Yes!" said Rupert.

Father put down his fork and leaned forward over the table. "Rupert. Do not be ridiculous. You have not proved yourself capable of handling that sort of responsibility."

"I just haven't had the chance yet," said Rupert, lifting his chin. He glanced over at Albert, hoping for something, anything. Hoping that just this once, Albert would nod and agree and say, "Yes, Rupert. I think you could." But Albert was steely faced; he looked offended that Rupert would dare to infringe on his war.

"We don't wait for chances in this family," said Father. "We make our own."

"Fine," said Rupert, pushing back his chair and scrambling to his feet. "Then that's what I'll do."

"You're not serious," said Albert.

"I am," said Rupert. "My talents are obviously wasted at school. It's time I put them to good use. I'll come back with *loads* of medals. You'll see."

"Don't be stupid," said Albert. He had a funny look on his face, one that Rupert almost mistook for concern. "You're just a kid. It's war, Rupert. It's not a joke."

"Which is why you'll see that I'm not laughing." Rupert took a deep breath. "Right, well, I suppose I should go pack, then." He nodded at his parents and spun on his heel.

"Rupert." Mother sighed as he strode toward the door.

“Let him go,” Father said mildly, as if he were speaking about a dog who’d wandered too far in the park. “He’ll be back before dinner tomorrow.”

“But what if he actually —”

“Then we’ll see if he’s a real Lucian” — Father cleared his throat — “or just an overly coddled embarrassment.”

Rupert’s shoulders stiffened, but he didn’t turn around. The next time they saw him, he’d be a decorated officer. A hero they’d be begging to attend the council meetings. He stomped out noisily, hoping to obscure any further cutting remarks. But it wasn’t necessary. The clinking of china and the scrape of silver were the only sounds that pierced the heavy silence.



After a very quick stop in London for some necessities and a ferry ride across the Channel, Rupert enjoyed a beautiful train ride through the French countryside. Outside, it was lightly snowing, and inside he had hot cocoa and a comfortable seat and biscuits. From that first-class seat, Rupert could feel his anger and hurt give way to excitement as he sped toward glory. Albert had been half-right — he was a *little* young to be a soldier. But there were many ways to fudge things, especially if you were a Cahill.

His background only made it natural for him to succeed. He was grafted from the same tree as Napoleon, and countless kings and queens of not only England, but the whole world. And he expected the same rights and privileges as had been afforded to them — the officers’ camp, with a map spread over a huge table and pawn pieces to slide across it, pages in matching livery, and well-mannered horses with gleaming saddles. That’s how it was in books. He saw no reason that he should be denied a place in those pages as well.

All of their deeds and achievements, of course, were linked to the Clue hunt — that race across generations and around the world to piece together the key to ultimate power — a serum that would turn the drinker into the most creative, brilliant, cunning, and athletic human to ever walk the earth. Over four hundred years ago, Gideon Cahill had figured out the secret to that power, and his descendants had been fighting over it ever since. The Cahills were a cut above, of course, and the Lucians were the cream that rose to the top. Descendants of Luke Cahill, Rupert’s family branch, were cool and cunning and — if he did say so himself — altogether

handsome and brilliant. Luke had done well to take the piece of the serum that had given him such gifts — had twined them into his very cells and passed them down to his children and his children's children, all the way to Rupert. And Rupert was determined to be deserving of that legacy, no matter what his father thought of him.

The snow had stopped a while back, fizzling into a gray, misty drizzle as the train took him farther and farther into France. To the Continent, December had brought a chilling, persistent wetness that could barely be kept at bay by the comforts of a bright and heated first-class train ticket.

He went to the first-class water closet and changed into his uniform. He'd had one, and a spare, made up at a tailor in London — it fit perfectly and was lined in silk, which he felt was both practical and best up to his standards. He wasn't exactly *in* the army yet — his plan, he thought, worked better if he handled all of the paperwork at a later date. And there were certain perks to breaking into the army on your own terms — he doubted that soldiers were regularly permitted to ride first class on their way to the field of battle. Besides, paperwork wasn't the fun part, and Rupert only wanted to do the fun parts.

In his new and comfortable uniform, Rupert stepped off the train. He was ready to take over this war. But instead of being full of cheering villagers, the train platform was practically empty. And the people who were there walked with their heads down, their children tucked close to their sides. It was so quiet — like everyone was afraid to make sudden noises. Rupert straightened his collar, walked up to the ticket counter, and inquired as to where he might get a car to take him to the field.

The man at the counter raised his eyebrows at the question. "*Je suis désolé*," said the man. "No cars. All of the cars are in use for the armies. No cars. *Désolé, désolé*. So sorry."

"*Pardonnez-moi*," said Rupert, taking a step back from the window and gesturing to his pressed khaki shirt. "But who do you think I am?"

"I am *désolé*," said the man again, "but they are not here. No cars here. Soldiers — you walk."

"Walk? To the front?" said Rupert. And the ticket man nodded.

"You follow the road *à l'est* and you will find it." Rupert thought the old man shuddered.

"There has to be another way," said Rupert.

“I am afraid not,” said the ticket man, and he looked so sad when he said it. “*Vous savez*,” said the ticket man, “this is the last train going north. After that, all trains will carry only soldiers and food for armies. There will be no more tickets to sell.”

Rupert looked at him askance. Was he implying that Rupert should go back on the train? He couldn’t do that.

“The war will be over soon,” said Rupert, not knowing what else to say.

“*Oui*,” said the ticket man. “Let us hope. *Bonne chance*.”

Rupert lifted his rucksack onto his shoulder and turned away, feeling unsettled. He didn’t know what the ticket man had been implying, but he had other problems to solve. Like how to get himself to the battlefield, and how to save his pride in the process.



Rupert did not end up walking. He managed to catch a ride on a cart full of sheep and cabbages, being driven by an old farmer and a wheezy gray horse. It was a cranky journey, and the thought of being spotted by a fellow Cahill made his cheeks burn. He was banged about on the back of the wagon like he was the cabbage, and the smell of it all lodged itself so firmly in his nose that he didn’t think he’d ever get rid of it. But it wasn’t walking. He had said he would not walk, and that was the sticking point.

“*Ici, ici*,” said the farmer, whom Rupert had paid to carry him in his cart.

“We’re not there yet,” said Rupert. He could see the beginnings of the front ahead — what looked like a huddle of tents and piles of supplies. “It’s still up there.”

“*Vous marchez*,” said the farmer, miming a march.

Obviously, this was a language-barrier issue. Rupert leaped down from the back of the cabbage cart, his rucksack over his shoulder.

“Look,” he said, gesturing out toward the camp. “There. That’s where I’m going.”

“*Marchez*,” said the farmer, nodding. “*Bonne chance!*” And then he flicked the reins and the horse began to amble away.

“Hey!” Rupert yelled, dropping his rucksack onto the road and waving his arms. “Stop! Come back here! Come back here this instant!”

But the farmer ignored him, and Rupert was left standing on the freezing road. The camp looked even farther away now than it had before. He looked behind him, to see if another farmer was leaving the town and headed down his way. But there was no

one. And a feeling of isolation, like a cold snake, slipped under his skin. He was alone, in a field, in the middle of war-torn France.

Which at least meant there was no one to witness his humiliation. Rupert picked up his sack and stepped off of the road. His boot gave a sick, wet *squelch* as it sank into the cold mud. Thunder boomed in the distance, and the last thing he wanted was to get caught in the marsh in a rainstorm. He'd probably drown or get sucked down into the bog. So he squelched his way across the mud fields as the thunder grew louder. What had once been a field that grew wheat or lavender or had pastured cows and sheep had been mashed into the gateway of a war. It was depressing. Rupert was sure better things lay ahead. He would walk into camp and present himself as an officer, and destiny would take its course. His natural leadership skills would reveal themselves in no time at all. It would be, as his nanny Pat always said, easy as porridge and pie.

Night was falling quickly, and so Rupert hurried. As he drew nearer the camp, the thunder grew louder, but still there was no rain, and no lightning.

"Who's that there?" came a voice from the camp. "Oi! Get on in here! You there — get the lead out of your pants and get on in." It was a young private, waving his cap in Rupert's general direction. Rupert picked up his pace and trotted over to where the tents and hasty buildings were huddled together. He didn't quite understand — he was already dirty enough. There was no need to worry about the rain. In fact, he thought it would probably do his uniform some good.

But what he heard was not thunder.

Another rumble rolled over them, much closer this time. So close that Rupert could feel the earth tremble beneath him, sending shivers up through his legs.

"Close one, that was," said the private, rubbing a dirty hand over a freckled face.

"What is it?" asked Rupert.

The private looked at him as if Rupert were quite possibly the daftest person along the front. "The — the Germans. You know — the — the . . . Oh, you're kidding! You got me. You did. You had me going for a tick there."

Rupert played along and smiled, but inside he was not smiling. The Germans were that close — and had weapons that could break the earth beneath him? The Duke of Wellington didn't have this to contend with when waging the Battle of Waterloo against Napoleon.

“I am Special Officer Davenport,” said Rupert, brushing the private’s laughter aside. “And I demand to be taken to your commanding officer. Posthaste.”

“Oh, right away. Special Officer — whoa,” said the private, and Rupert was pleased to see that he was appropriately awed.

“Indeed,” said Rupert with a smile.

“Oh, ah, right, yes,” said the private. “Brigadier-General Keswith, that’s who you’ll want. Straight back and then second tent on the right.”

“Thank you very much,” said Rupert, moving along. The ground rumbled again, and he tried not to let his fear show. In the distance, he could see towers of black smoke, and every now and again the orange bloom of fire. Rupert rapped upon the tent post near the entrance flap.

“What’s that?” called a voice from inside.

Rupert stepped inside. And promptly felt himself deflate.

There were no pages in matching uniforms. There was hardly even a desk for the officer whose tent it was — it actually looked like a barn door atop a crate and an overturned bucket. It wasn’t exactly the setting he imagined for his swift ascent to fame and glory.

“I — I’m, I’m here . . .” But Rupert was having a hard time coming up with words. This was not what he expected.

“What is it? Speak up, boy, speak up! I haven’t got all day!” Brigadier-General Keswith checked his watch and stood up. He was tall and thin, with a thick bottlebrush mustache and even thicker glasses.

He did not resemble the Duke of Wellington.

“I’m . . . reporting in, sir!” said Rupert, giving his best salute. “I’ve just come off the train from England. I was told to, erm, report here.” He had to make this work. The thought of returning home in disgrace was almost too much to process.

“What the devil do you mean?” said the officer. “I’m not expecting any men. Certainly not just *one*.”

“I was sent on special assignment,” said Rupert. “Special Officer Davenport, sir.”

“Special officer, eh?” said the officer. “What kind of special are you, then?”

Rupert smiled proudly. “All kinds. But I’m particularly good at leading the men. I’m also something of a chemist, and I know more military history than, well, almost anyone.”

The officer burst out laughing. “A chemist! What use do I have for a chemist out here? What are you going to do? Set the Germans to simmer over a Bunsen burner? *Bore* them to death, will you? What on earth — why are you wasting my time?”

Bore! Rupert was aghast. There was nothing boring about deadly poisons and the delicate precision of chemistry. He opened his mouth to argue, but Keswith wasn’t paying attention to him anymore.

“Davenport,” the officer was mumbling, and then he shook his head. “Get down to the trenches. Colonel Bullsworth will know what to do with you.”



The trenches. Rupert had read about them in the newspapers back home. He knew that the soldiers dug into the ground and built up the sides of their ditches with beams and sandbags. He knew that the soldiers on both sides lived in them to protect themselves from all of the new kinds of weapons in the war — mortars and machine guns, and German flamethrowers that Rupert thought sounded like something someone had just made up one day, and couldn’t possibly be real. He knew the trenches were muddy and cold. But for all that he knew, he wasn’t prepared.

The trenches spread for miles through France and Belgium, and when Rupert saw them he couldn’t help but think they looked like massive open graves. They were full of water and mud, sometimes knee-deep, and rats ran back and forth like they were on patrol. Barbed wire coiled around the tops like deadly brambles.

Rupert took a deep breath so that his chest puffed up, and he lifted his chin a bit. Colonel Bullsworth had best not think that he would be *keeping* Rupert in a place like this. It was filthy! And cold.

Another ripping of artillery crashed nearby, and Rupert instinctively covered his head. The men around him ran up and down the lines, yelling and preparing to shoot back. They were fighting in sopping wet clothes, with bandages around their hands in place of gloves. Their boots were waterlogged and some of the soles flapped around like loose tongues. The gunfire went off in staccato bursts until, eventually, it died down. And instead of a cheer at the end, the soldiers just sighed and slumped down against the sides of the trenches.

Rupert could tell right away that the trenches were no place for someone of his finely tuned skills. Nor was this the manner in which he wanted to die. And while

Brigadier-General Keswith's little tent wasn't entirely impressive, Rupert was certain he could improve upon things.

"Keep your head down, you dolt!" someone yelled at him, and Rupert jumped and ducked his head. "What, are you fresh off the farm?"

"Certainly not a *farm*," said Rupert. "I'm looking for Colonel Bullsworth. Brigadier-General Keswith sent me."

"The Bull's back there," growled one of the soldiers, pointing down the line. Rupert craned his head and saw a line of soldiers at work digging into a new part of the trench. One of them was an impressively large man shoveling at twice the speed of the others.

"That's how you do it, boys!" he roared; he was smiling so much that Rupert thought he must even be enjoying himself. "Keep it up, for King and country!" The rest of the men could only mumble or groan at the weight of all the earth around them.

Rupert marched right up to him.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, "Special Officer Davenport reporting. Brigadier-General Keswith sent me to you, Colonel Bullsworth. It's a pleasure to meet you."

The officer stopped shoveling, and he gave Rupert the strangest look. Like he wasn't quite sure what was happening. Like he was a cat, and Rupert was a surprise canary that had just fallen out of the sky.

"Excuse me," came a voice from behind him. "*I* am Colonel Bullsworth. Thank you very much, Major Thompson — back to your post." The actual Colonel Bullsworth was much smaller than the man with the shovel. He looked, in fact, more like a piglet than a bull. His cheeks were pink, and his hair was white-blond, and his nose turned up. "Keswith sent you, did he?"

Rupert tried to ignore the funny look that this Major Thompson gave him as he went off, back to wherever his post had been. Instead, he turned his attention to the Bull. "Yes, sir!" said Rupert, brightening instantly. "He sent me right to you — he knew that I'd be perfect for that, erm, important thing that you needed someone to do."

Surely the colonel had something important that needed doing.

"Yes, yes," said Bullsworth. "Take this message to Captain McIntyre." He handed a piece of folded paper to Rupert, who looked at it.

"And what am I to do after that?" asked Rupert.

"You are to come back with Captain McIntyre's answer," he said.

Rupert gave the message a narrowed glare, but he took it anyway. “Where is Captain McIntyre?”

“Next trench over,” said the colonel. The trenches weren’t straight ditches like he’d thought they would be. They curved and jutted out at angles. And they weren’t one long line; they were broken up into segments. That way, if the Germans made it into one of them, the entire front wasn’t compromised.

But if Captain McIntyre was in the next trench over, that meant that Rupert would have to go up top.

Up top was where the guns and the shells and the dead bodies were.

“But what if I . . . what if I don’t make it?” said Rupert.

“I know what the message says. I can write another. Get on with it.”

Rupert looked up at the lip of the trench. Right.

It would be easy. Just up and over, sprint a couple of yards, and then back down into the trench. Still, he shivered to think of it. Maybe there was something else he could do.

But the colonel was already gone, and Rupert couldn’t give his note back to him. He looked over his shoulder; one of the other soldiers was there, staring at him. The other soldier raised his eyebrows, like a challenge. He’d heard everything, it seemed. Rupert returned the stare, and frowned at the other soldier.

“Carry on, then,” Rupert sneered. He put the message in his breast pocket and buttoned it shut. Besides, there was always the possibility that this note would turn the tide of the war. He thought of what they’d say at home when Rupert returned ablaze with shining medals.

Rupert put his hands to the ladder. It was covered in mud and grit, and something sticky he didn’t want to think about right then. In his mind, he queued up a thunderous, dramatic song to set the stage. And then, like a shot, he took off up over the top.

The Germans wasted no time. There was a *crack*, a *crack*, another *crack*. The sound of gunfire ricocheted around in his head, and he dove forward into the dirt.

Every animal instinct in his brain came alive all at once. His body locked and his mind went blank. He wanted to scream, but no sound would come out of his mouth and no air would go into his lungs. He couldn’t move and they were shooting at him and Rupert knew he would die.

He had to move. It took every ounce of self-control that Rupert possessed, but he crawled forward in the dirt on his belly, sopping through the cold mud with his elbows and knees. He was scrambling, trying to make it another twenty, another ten, another five feet. Dirt sprayed next to him from where a bullet landed and burrowed into the ground. He dug his toes into the dirt and half ran, half crawled through a haze of gunfire, pikes, and coils of barbed wire. And then, with the edge of the next trench in sight, he dove.

He tumbled awkwardly down over the side and into the arms and legs and shoulders of the soldiers there. Some had been having cups of coffee; another had been napping. Rupert effectively ruined that for them.

Luckily for him, they were good sports about it.

“Right side up now,” said the tallest, who, again, didn’t seem to be much older than Rupert. “Who’d you come looking for?”

But Rupert found that he was having a hard time talking. And hearing. Everything around him was a dull white roar. His hands were shaking and he couldn’t get them to stop. He crossed his arms and tucked his hands into his armpits but the rest of him began to tremble until his teeth chattered and he thought his eyes might get shaken right out of his head.

“First time making the dash, huh?” said the tall private. “Here, you sit down. Smitty, hand me that cup there.” Another soldier, who hadn’t been napping, handed a tin mug over to the first. “Here now. Take a minute and get your pieces back in place.”

He gave Rupert the mug, and Rupert took it. The mug was still warm, despite the cold December air. And while, in the normal world, Rupert Davenport would never, *ever* put his mouth to anything that someone else had touched, he took a drink of the coffee. It was hot and bitter, and it coaxed some sense of feeling back into his rattled self.

“Thank you,” Rupert said. And the tall soldier tipped his helmet. “I’m looking for Captain McIntyre.”

“Sure thing,” said the tall soldier. “Back over that way.”

Rupert thanked him and set off. He found the captain, and then had to wait while he composed an answer.

“There you are,” said Captain McIntyre, handing the note back to Rupert. “And tell the colonel that yes, if he wants to send over the tin of biscuits, that’d suit me just fine.”

“It was a note about biscuits?” said Rupert, aghast.

“Not entirely,” said the captain. “Off with you now. These things don’t deliver themselves.”

But when Rupert was in front of the ladder again, he found he couldn’t move. He knew that everyone was watching him. He could feel their eyes on his back. His hands were shaking and no matter how much his brain screamed at his legs, he couldn’t make them lift his feet up onto the rungs. And before Rupert knew it, he was shaking his head and saying, “No. No, I won’t. No.”

“Hey.” The tall private who had given Rupert his coffee came up next to him. “Look, you’ve got to. You don’t get to say no. You’ll be shot, kid.”

Rupert’s mouth went dry. Be killed in the trench for not going up top, or get killed in no-man’s-land because he went up top. That didn’t seem a fair bargain. For a moment, Rupert wished he hadn’t been quite so dismissive when Albert tried to warn him about what war was really like, but it was far too late for that now.

“I’m no coward,” Rupert said. And he tried to mean it. He swallowed the dryness on his tongue and lifted one foot up onto a rung. His heart was like a lead block beating inside of him — it was so heavy and frantic that he could feel the thumping down in his knees and up in his eyes.

If he wanted to be taken seriously, he had to do it.

Rupert counted to three, and then he scampered like a rabbit in a fox hunt. The German line erupted with gunfire again, and Rupert’s head went light. He was stumbling. At the edge of his home trench, he tumbled in again.

“Well done, Davenport,” said the Bull, seeing him fall over the side.

But Rupert didn’t hear him. His head was still light and he was shaking again and this was awful. It was the worst he’d ever felt in his life, and that included the time that Albert had stolen his stuffed bear, Baron von Tuffington, and buried him in the stables.

“I said” — the Bull came over to him and clapped a hand on his shoulder — “well done, Davenport.”

And that’s when Rupert threw up on the Bull’s boots.



This was not what Rupert had signed up for. He’d been relegated to trench-digging duty and his hands were covered in calluses and blisters, his shoulders and back

ached with every swipe of his shovel, and his boots were ruined from standing in ankle-deep water for eight hours every day so that now the water crept in and wrapped his feet in ice and dirt. This had happened to some of the other boys, too, and their feet were swollen and spotted with sores. *Essential work*, it was called, but Rupert didn't believe it. He wanted a chance — he kept looking for the opportunity to make one. Like Father said he should.

But his chance found him the next morning. Rupert was eating a breakfast of cold beans from a can when another soldier came up to Rupert, panting.

"You're . . . you're Davenport," he said.

"Indeed," said Rupert, as gentlemanlike as he could. "How can I help you?"

"The major," said the soldier. "I've been looking all . . . all over for you. The major wants you," he said, and then turned and took off through the other soldiers again. Rupert grabbed his rucksack and went after him, stepping over other soldiers, who were sleeping or shaving or writing letters home.

The private took Rupert to one of the damp holes that had been built into the trenches. Wet sandbags made the walls, and the crumbly dirt ceiling was held up by bowing wooden rafters. Wild, flickering light spilled out of a smoky lantern, casting jumpy shadows all over everything. The major sat upon an overturned crate, a map rolled out in front of him, and a fat cigar clenched between his teeth. It was the same man Rupert had seen on his first day, shoveling the dirt like a machine. Just thinking about it made Rupert's arms ache. The major was a wide and tall man; Rupert thought he looked like he, too, was made of crates all piled up on top of one another.

"Sir!" said the private, jumping to attention. "Special Officer Davenport as requested, sir!"

"Yes, thank you, Private," said the major, looking up. He took his cigar from his mouth and gestured at Rupert with it. "Sit down, son. Private Jenkins, bring in the tea tray."

Jenkins hopped to it, and Rupert sat himself down across from the major.

"I'll be mother," said the major. He picked up the teapot and daintily poured a cup for Rupert, and one for himself. "Sugar?" he asked, before adding four lumps to his own cup.

"Thank you," said Rupert, stirring his tea. "I appreciate the gesture. It's been so long since I've sat down to a proper cup."

"I thought you might say as much," said the major.

“Did you?”

“I did. I’ve been watching you, Davenport. Imagine my shock at meeting you on your first day here! Well, I know what you expect. I know about Eton. I know about Oxford. And I know about the Marne. I was surprised to see you in these parts, but I should have known you’d have heard the rumors by now.”

Rupert paused for a moment, and then he nodded. So the major thought he was Albert. That was okay. Rupert could play along with that.

The major leaned back on his crate, took a sip of tea, and leveled his gaze at Rupert. “I’ve a mission for you, Davenport,” he said.

Rupert knew that was coming. He could feel it, he swore, from a mile away. Even so, he sat up a little straighter. “Yes, sir?”

“I need someone with your particular . . . skills,” said the major. “And connections.”

“Certainly!” said Rupert. He was trying very hard to not look too eager — he desperately wanted to play it cool. But he was failing. The prospect of stealing a special mission from right under Albert’s nose made Rupert’s very muscles twitch with excitement. He could just imagine telling the tale at the dinner table. “Well, you know, they had originally wanted Albert for the job, but then they realized that I was *much* better suited to the task.”

“It’ll be dangerous,” said the major. “Awfully so. We’ll be headed across enemy lines.”

Even better, Rupert thought to himself. Perhaps he’d find a way to send his father a telegram from a foreign post office, so he’d know that Rupert was already in the thick of it.

“You say the word and I’m ready, sir,” said Rupert. “It would be an honor to serve King and country in whatev —” But then Rupert stopped. Because something caught his eye — a ring on the major’s hand. A ring with a crest on it. A blue crest with a white bear.

That’s when Rupert jumped to his feet. “What do you want?” he blurted. A Tomas. This major was from another branch of the Cahill family. Rupert felt a rush of suspicion set every nerve in his body on high alert. This was far too much of a coincidence to be anything other than a trap.

But the major merely took another sip of his tea. “Do sit down, Davenport. You’ll be much more comfortable.”

“I’ll stay standing, thanks,” said Rupert. But the major pointed.

“Sit now,” he said, in a tone that made Rupert do as he said. “Now, where were we? Right. You were going on about King and country. It’s bigger than that, although more of a family affair, cousin.”

“Don’t call me that,” said Rupert.

“Look,” said the major, tamping out his cigar. “I don’t like this any more than you do. You think I want to waste my valuable time trying to talk to some slimy Lucian? No, I don’t. But things happen, and here we are.”

Rupert didn’t say anything else. He wasn’t paying attention. He was looking behind the Tomas, over his own shoulder, at his feet, trying to figure out where the blow was going to come from.

“Stop fidgeting,” said the Tomas major.

“I’m not fidgeting,” snapped Rupert. “I’m trying to figure out how you’re going to kill me. It must be something having to do with brute force. Your type aren’t known for their cunning or imagination.”

The major’s smile was grim. “If I wanted you dead, Davenport, you’d be half-buried or half-eaten in no-man’s-land by now. Unfortunately, I need you alive for this. So stop your mouth, and listen to me. The Germans — they’ve kidnapped a Cahill.”

Rupert folded his arms. “A Lucian? Because if not, it’s none of my concern.”

The major’s face turned grim, like the way clouds boiled and roared before a storm. “It’s all of our concern. Not just the family’s. Not just one branch’s. It’s all of ours. They’ve got an *Ekat*.”

“So?” said Rupert.

“Don’t be an idiot,” said the major. “His name is Dr. Frederick Woolsey. He’s a chemist out of Oxford. And they’ve got him working on some sort of . . . I don’t know all of the details, and even if I did, I wouldn’t understand it. But it’s a weapon, and if he gets far on it, the war is all but lost. I know that Lucians are about as sympathetic as pond scum and as cooperative as spoiled toddlers, but this is important.”

“I’m not interested,” Rupert said, and stood up. His family would hardly be impressed to learn that he’d spent his time on the continent rescuing an *Ekat*.

“That’s too bad,” said the major. “I never thought I’d see such a coward amongst the Lucians.”

Rupert froze. He bristled. He knew he shouldn’t dignify that with a response, but he really couldn’t help himself.

“I’m not a coward,” said Rupert.

“Then I suggest you stay. Unless you want your branch to be left out of the most important rescue mission in this century. It’s not going to be easy, Davenport, but it’s got to be done. This Woolsey is as genius as they come, and I don’t want to think about what they have him working on. We’ve got to get him back on this side of the line, and we’ve got to destroy his lab. It’s not a joke.”

Rupert turned and glowered at the Tomas.

“Believe me, I don’t like it, either,” said the major. “Let the fact that I’m *asking* you to do this be a testament to the seriousness of the operation.”

Rupert sat back in the chair. The major made a good point. “Fine,” said Rupert. “I’ll *deign* to help you. But don’t you dare try anything.”

“I swear on my favorite tea cozy,” said the major, putting one hand on his heart and lifting the other in the air. “Besides, there’s another cousin coming along. And I’ll need you around to keep me sane. If there’s anything worse than a Lucian, it’s a Janus.”

A Janus. Rupert closed his eyes. If the war didn’t kill him, this was bound to.



The next day, at dusk, Rupert and Major Thompson prepared to set off. Rupert had snuck over to the supply tents that morning and slipped a few cans of beans and packets of crackers into his rucksack, hiding them beneath his spare uniform. He didn’t have much else besides — a toothbrush, a woolen blanket, and two contrary cousins. Despite the absurdity of the situation, he was ready to do it. He’d had a moment to think things over, and he’d decided that this *was* his chance. He’d do something amazing on this mission, and then they’d all see him for how valuable he was. For how much he *meant*. This wasn’t just a war mission — this was a *Cahill* mission, which was infinitely more important than just some war stuff.

Major Thompson’s plan was simple enough. They would leave the trenches. Then, in the orchards a half mile away, they would meet up with the Janus cousin. From there, they would sneak across the border between the armies. They would follow the trenches as they snaked across the border from France to Belgium, cutting across the Lys River. Major Thompson knew of a stretch right along the river where the trenches had all been destroyed in a bombing a few weeks back. They would use the quiet there to cross the river, sneak into the old factory where the Ekat was being held, destroy the lab, and then sneak the doctor back across.

Rupert knew that the first part — leaving the trenches — might be the last as well. He began to shake, just thinking about it. But he promised himself, no matter what, he would not throw up on anyone this time.

Rupert and Major Thompson waited until it was dark. They slipped along to the darkest part of the line, where there were no lanterns and no moonlight. It was a quiet night — there was a break in the fighting, and a stiff stillness had settled over everything. It was as if the dark was afraid to move around them, afraid of waking up the war again. The peace was artificial — Rupert knew, and everyone knew, that the stretch of land ahead was a graveyard of land mines and dead men.

“Set, then?” whispered the major. Rupert tried to say yes, but he couldn’t speak. Instead he nodded, like this was no big deal. “All right,” said the major.

And then, on the count of three, they heaved themselves up and over the edge.

Rupert’s heart was beating so fast and so loud, he knew the Germans could hear it. With his cheek pressed into the cold mud, Rupert waited for the gunfire. He waited to die. But nothing came. *They must not have seen us*, he thought. There was no moonlight because of the thick clouds. He promised himself he’d never complain about bad weather again.

He felt Major Thompson’s hand on his shoulder. The major tapped once, twice, three times, and at the third tap, the two of them slipped to their feet and took off in a crouched run. They were headed to the woods, to the safety of the tree line.

Rupert tried to ignore everything around him. He tried to ignore the enemy that hid only yards away. He tried to ignore the dead bodies. He told himself Davenports kept their lips stiff and their eyes ahead. He tried to ignore the coils of wire waiting to spring at him, to snare him, to hold him down while other people shot at him.

He could do this, he promised himself. He could show them. And maybe, he thought from a small back room in his brain, he could show himself, too.

They moved quietly through the dark. But the same clouds that protected them from sight also nearly killed them. Because Rupert stepped in a miry, soggy pit from a mortar shell. The *splash* seemed to echo in the still, cold night, and from far too close, Rupert could hear the first German stir.

“*Wer ist da?*” called one of them.

“Run!” Major Thompson hissed. Stealth was no longer an asset, only speed. A dull roar began in the back of Rupert’s brain, and it spread up around his head and filled his ears until all he could hear was the rush of his own heart and the thumping of

his own legs. He splashed along behind Major Thompson. It felt as if they were only inches ahead of the German gunfire. It was just like delivering the messages, but instead of another trench, he was running for the tree line.

Until he tripped. With a cry, Rupert was pitched forward. He landed on his face, his hands skidding out in front of him, and his mind went blank. The world faded into a white haze and the only thing he was aware of was his own body, his limbs in the dirt, and his heart, which was still beating, somehow. He lifted his head and it felt like he was moving through deep water, and it pressed down on him.

With a great *crack* right beside his head, the whole world came back to him. Sounds and smells hit him again: the sharp bursts of gunfire, the earthy smell of water and dirt, Major Thompson's boots against the ground growing farther and farther away.

Rupert had to get up. He pushed against the ground, dug his boots into the dirt. And then he was running.

When he passed the tree line, Major Thompson grabbed him by the collar and dragged him down into the soggy leaves.

"Get off! Get off of me!" Rupert hissed, remembering only at the last minute to keep his voice down. So this was Thompson's plan, he thought. He'd take Rupert out past the trenches, past the others who would see. And he'd kill him in the woods. That's what a Cahill would do. It's what Rupert should have thought about.

"Shh!" Major Thompson put a hand over Rupert's mouth. "You'll get us shot, you idiot. Stop your thrashing! Hold still!"

Rupert eventually did. But only so he could stop and think about a way to escape.

"Now get up," said Major Thompson, extending a hand down to him. "Our Janus ally won't wait forever."

Rupert was confused. He looked at the major's hand suspiciously, but took it and slowly got to his feet. His legs felt like jelly and his throat was dry. He couldn't go on. He knew he couldn't. Rupert leaned against a tree, his hands pressed against his chest. His heart. He could still feel his heart beating. He was amazed — he didn't understand how he could still be alive.

"Are you done? I said, let's get going," said the major. "We've got a ways to walk."



The woods were dark and cold, and Rupert felt very lost.

“Where are we going?” Rupert asked. “Where are you taking us?”

“To the meeting place,” said the major.

“Where is that? You have to tell me these things or I’ll leave.”

“Fine,” said the major. “Have fun getting back to the trenches. And then telling them where you’ve been.”

Rupert gritted his teeth and continued on. He didn’t like when the major was right. Rupert tried to think ahead, but there was little appealing about camping outside in a forest in the middle of December. But at least, Rupert thought, there would be no puddles six inches deep, or rats running over you while you tried to sleep. At least, he hoped not.

“There, ahead,” said the major. Ahead of them, about the length of two football pitches away, was a flickering light. Rupert’s stomach went cold — colder, that is.

“That could be anyone,” said Rupert.

“It’s not,” said the major. “It’s where we’re going.”

Rupert wasn’t sure. It could be the Janus, but it could also be some Germans hiding out. Or angry Frenchmen with pitchforks. A person couldn’t just walk up to a lantern in the middle of the war and be sure who it shined for.

Rupert looked over his shoulder. The woods were dark — the only light was from the moon, and even that was muted by the clouds. He could run for it. He could, at the count of three, take off into the woods, and the major would never find him. He could make his way to a village and pay someone to take him back to England and then forget about all of this.

Or he could freeze overnight and be found on the side of the road in a week, half eaten by wild dogs.

But then Albert would be right — they would all be right about him.

Rupert rubbed one of the brass buttons on his coat between his fingers. It was sharp and cold. Better, he thought, to die a Lucian than as a no one on the side of a nowhere road.

The building with the lantern was an old, abandoned barn. Rupert couldn’t see much in the bad light, but it was a rather sad place. He wasn’t sure it even had a roof anymore. When they were within a few yards, the major bent to find a stone or heavy stick amongst the underbrush. And then he threw it at the barn, where it struck the side with a clatter.

The lantern vanished from the window, pulled inside by an invisible hand. The sudden loss of light was hard on Rupert's eyes; he couldn't see hardly anything.

"*Wer ist da?*" came a gruff, deep voice from inside. "*Qui est là? Répondez-moi! Vite! Schnell!*"

Rupert recoiled. Straight to the Germans. Major Thompson had taken them straight to the Germans.

"*Ta famille, ma cousine,*" Major Thompson called back. "*Tes cousins.* Now let us in; it's freezing out here."

The door swung open, and the lantern light spilled out. It was held, not by a massive German general or a French farmer with a pitchfork, but by a country girl who still wore her hair in braids. She didn't look much older than Rupert.

"It is not much better in here," she said in a thick French accent. And then she stood aside to let the two Englishmen in, narrowing her eyes at them as they passed. Clearly, this Janus girl didn't trust them any more than Rupert trusted the other two. He imagined the only reason that Major Thompson was so at ease was because he could crush the two of them with one hand.

The girl set the lantern in the center of the barn in a space clear of hay; it cast wide shadows all around. The barn was, indeed, missing great swaths of its roof, and the rest of it was filled with old hay and moldy weeds.

"You are late," said the Janus, folding her arms across her chest. "I thought you must have had fear and decided that you would not come."

The major snorted. "Hardly. And if that were the case, I think it would be the other way around."

"*Excusez-moi, cochon Tomas?*"

"What did you just say to me?"

"What's your name?" Rupert blurted over the noise. If they killed each other, he'd never find his way out of this forest, and then he would be a dead no one on the side of a nowhere road.

The girl pursed her lips and slid her eyes back and forth between Rupert and the major, as if she was trying to decide if she really wanted to tell them. "Marie," she said.

"I'm Special Officer Davenport, son of Lord Winthrop Alfred Davenport, the Earl of Southington," he responded. In a world of Cahills, it was best to make one's station perfectly clear. "This is Major Thompson."

“Enchantée,” said Marie, but Rupert wasn’t sure she meant it.

“This is where we are staying?” asked Rupert.

“Oui — yes,” said Marie.

“Aren’t you a local — isn’t that why you’re allowed to come along with us? Why aren’t we at your house, where there is a fire and beds? You do have a fire, don’t you?” said Rupert.

Marie snorted. “You think I would let a Lucian and a Tomas in my house? You think I would let you follow me to my home? But I am not stupid, Monsieur Davenport.”

“Special Officer,” Rupert corrected her. But Marie did not give him the satisfaction of a snarl, or an apology.

That night, Rupert did the unthinkable. He went to sleep in a pile of wet, moldy hay. Of course, conditions in the trenches weren’t much better. But at least, if you snuck to the back of the lines, you could usually find a free cot and a blanket. What he wouldn’t give for a four-poster bed, a down comforter, and a valet to bring him a cup of cocoa before turning the light down.

It was a restless night. Major Thompson snored and Marie lay so still that Rupert thought she might be dead. And throughout the night, Rupert jolted awake, his heart pounding, certain that someone was moments from bursting into the barn or burning it down.

He stared up at the half-worn-away roof. Of all the ways Rupert had imagined this adventure going — all of which had ended in the same way, with Father giving him the approving nod he gave Albert, with Mother telling him that he’d done a good job — Rupert never, ever imagined that he would find himself hiding in a derelict barn, about to take on a secret search-and-rescue mission with a Tomas and a Janus. He wondered what Albert would do in his situation. Would Albert sneak out on his own, steal the major’s plan, and rescue the Ekat before the others woke up in the morning? The major thought that he was Albert — so what did he expect him to do and what special skills did he have to offer? The only thing Rupert knew Albert was good at was being a smarmy pig.

But thinking things like that about Albert didn’t give Rupert the same sort of satisfaction they had before. He pulled his coat tighter around himself and pulled his knees up closer to his chest. If blaming Albert for things that went wrong wasn’t going to make him feel better, then he didn’t know what to do.



In the morning, Rupert's coat was frozen into stiff pleats and a film of muddy ice had crusted around his boots, so thick that he couldn't get to his laces. The others were awake. Marie had opened the top of the lantern and was heating a small thermos of water over the little flame.

"Your major is outside doing leaps and nonsense," said Marie, her nose turned upward. Rupert stood and stretched, and went to the window where the lantern had been last night. Major Thompson was out in the small open space in front of the barn doing calisthenics.

"He's not my major any more than he's yours," said Rupert, coming back to the lantern. "What have you got there?"

"*Café*," said Marie.

Rupert reached into his rucksack and pulled out a half-squashed paper packet of soda crackers. "Would you care to share breakfast?" he said. She wouldn't give him any coffee if he didn't share something with her, he knew. And Rupert would have given his left arm for any kind of warmth.

Marie considered this for a moment. "*Oui*," she said. And then, "Do you think that we should save *un petit peu* for *le major*?"

Rupert thought about that for a moment. "What do you think he'd do if we didn't?"

"Eat us for his breakfast?" said Marie.

Rupert almost laughed. *Almost*. Except it was too close to being an actual, possible truth that he didn't think it quite prudent. But still, they saved him a few of the crackers and a sip of coffee.

"Why are you here?" Rupert asked as they ate. "I mean — helping to get the Ekat back?"

"Do you want to know why *I* am here, or why it is not some big and strong Janus man with the muscles and things?" said Marie.

"Both," said Rupert.

Marie pursed her lips for a moment. "It is no good to have a war in your home. My brother fights; my *papa* has taken sick. It is not good here. France is ruined. And when I heard that they had taken this Dr. Woolsey, and that he was to make weapons for the Germans — I could not let that happen."

"But what can you do to stop it?" said Rupert. "I mean — you're a Janus. What are you going to do?"

Marie narrowed her eyes. “You are rude. And I will like to see you try to get across *la Lys* without my help. I will like to see you speak German and French and English, please.”

“All right, fine,” said Rupert.

“Do you know what it is like,” said Marie, “to see your family so broken? My brother is off at the war — I may never see him again. But I think he would be glad I do this. Even though he hates the Tomas and the Lucian. He thinks that you are what make war.”

“I have a brother, too,” said Rupert, taking a sip of the coffee. “He’s off fighting, too. Like me, I guess.”

“Do you worry for him?” she asked.

“It’s complicated,” said Rupert. Before, he hadn’t, really. Everyone had made the war seem so innocuous — like no one would actually ever be hurt or die from it. Now, suddenly, he did find himself wondering where Albert was along the line. Was he cold and wet, too? Did he think of Rupert, and where he had gone? “I didn’t before. But I do now. I want him to make it home as much as I want me to make it home, I guess. He’s my brother.”

After their rationed breakfast, Major Thompson gathered them all together for a strategy session.

The Ekat scientist was being held just across the Lys River — which was also just on the other side of the German trenches — in a factory. Major Thompson’s sources told him that it was heavily guarded by soldiers.

“Well, that much would be obvious,” said Marie. “Do you think that they would just leave him on a leash in the middle of a field?”

Major Thompson scowled. “That’s enough out of you for now.”

They would go to the river today, Major Thompson said, to survey the area. And then, that night, they would make their move.

“If I may, Major,” said Rupert, “don’t you think we should wait for a break in the weather? It looks like snow, and the last thing we’d want to do is leave a trail to where we are camped.”

Rupert certainly wasn’t scared — a Lucian would never back away from a challenge — and certainly not in front of a Janus or a Tomas. Something like that would equate to generations of shame upon the forefathers — or something else like

out of a Greek tragedy. Rupert refused to be a part of that. Still, he would feel a little more at ease if he knew he weren't going into enemy territory that very night.

"I just don't see who put you in charge of this operation," Rupert continued. "This isn't a military mission; your rank doesn't mean anything here. As the future head of the Lucian branch, I strongly feel that I should be put into the leadership position."

"I object," said Marie. "This is my land, and my country. I should say what we do."

"And I say out of the three of us, I'm the only one with any battlefield experience. So let's have the two of you stop your whining and let's get ready," said the major.

"I don't like your tone, Major. I don't like it at all," said Marie.

"I don't care," said the major. "Just do what I say."

The trio hid their few things in testy silence — the cold lantern, a blanket, a rucksack — under the hay, and set out for the river.

"Let's go this way," said the major, steering them left out of the barn. Marie stopped in her tracks and shook her head.

"*Absolument non*," she said. "That is through the bogs and past the main road. We will be trapped, or caught. *Non*, we go this way." She pointed to the right.

"Look, mademoiselle," said the major. "I know you're from these parts, but we Tomas know our way around. We are expert navigators. You ever heard of James Cook? Or Blackbeard?"

"Yes. So if we end up on a boat in the sea, you may be captain then," said Marie. "But while in France, I will say where to go."

And so Marie led the way, much to the obvious embarrassment of Major Thompson. Rupert trailed along uncomfortably. She wound them around through the trees, following a small stream that led into a larger brook, which then made a right into the thick, rushing Lys.

Rupert looked across the water. That was enemy territory, over there. Strange, how it looked so much like their side.

They followed the main rush of the Lys for about a mile. Then the sounds of men and machinery began to mingle with the bubbling, rolling sounds of the water.

On the other side, black and looming against the gray December sky, was a great block of a factory. Chimneys like witch's fingers reached up toward the white sun and spewed thick gray clouds of smoke.

"It used to make dyes for our linen and wool. Now it makes the gas," said Marie, in a voice that made Rupert shiver. He'd heard about the gas. No one on either side had

used it yet, but it hung there, like a knife over the heads of every soldier on either side of the war. People said it could turn your skin to blisters and burn your eyes out of your head. If it didn't kill you when it touched you, if you managed to get away, it would still kill you later. Once you met the gas, there was no escaping it.

"It looks like it makes soldiers," said Major Thompson. And that was true. The factory was swarming with men in German uniforms, like workers in an anthill. They patrolled the fence around the building, and the water line; they walked along the top with long-range guns and binoculars. They drove in and out in smoky, sputtering cars and atop commissioned farm horses. They had hundreds of guns between all of them, and if they so much as caught a whiff of Brit or Frenchwoman, they'd shoot to kill.

Yes, by all means, thought Rupert. *This is the perfect place to try and invade with an army of three.*

"You can't be serious about this," said Rupert. "They're everywhere! There's no way we'll get in here." *This is what you get,* he thought, *for listening to a Tomas and a Janus.*

Rupert felt himself shrinking away. They were three people — one a farm girl; one a soldier; and one a brave and handsome and intelligent sort of fellow, but one admittedly lacking in search-and-rescue experience. They were three people to find one person in the midst of an enormous factory guarded by dozens and dozens of other people with frightening weapons.

He glanced at the others. Marie was chewing on the inside of her cheek, her forehead creased. The major was muttering to himself, counting softly under his breath. They crept a little farther down the water, trying to angle to see the other side of the building. Along the south side was a gated yard, where piles of supplies stood under guard. The west side was against the water, and the north side was nothing but smooth wall with windows along the third floor. They couldn't see the east side, but Marie said that was where the main entrance was.

It seemed impossible to Rupert. There were obstacles no matter what way you looked at things.

"Tonight," Major Thompson said. "There will be fewer guards. We'll do it then."



That evening, Rupert sat on the old crate in the barn with the lantern lit at his feet. Marie was napping, and the major was hunched over, looking at something in the

dirt. Rupert looked down at the watch in his hands; it had been his grandfather's. Rupert had brought it with him, and now he watched the seconds tick by. The *tick* was so loud, it was like cymbals crashing in his brain, and he couldn't help but to think that every second that went by was one more second that moved him toward getting killed.

"Wake up, Marie," said the major, calling both Marie and Rupert over to his drawing. Marie immediately opened her eyes and sat up, looking like she'd just seen a ghost in her sleep. Rupert pulled the crate over to look at the major's map.

He'd drawn out the river and the factory, and then made notes where he had seen the guards that morning.

"We cross the river here," Marie said, indicating a spot in the river just a little southwest of the factory. "The water is slow and shallow."

"Fine," said the major, marking their path. "Then once we're over —"

"We enter the factory in disguise. As German soldiers," said Marie.

"Not all of us speak German," Rupert reminded her.

"Pity, that," said Marie. Rupert scowled at her.

"No," said the major. "We can climb the wall here." He pointed to the north side of the factory. "There wasn't a searchlight set up on this side. We'll scale the wall up to the third floor — there'll be fewer guards on such a high floor — and enter through the window."

"You must be joking!" said Marie. "Davenport will never be able to climb so high! His arms are too puny."

"Hey!" said Rupert. "Like you can climb a wall in a skirt. You'd get us caught. No, we'll go around this way. There's bound to be a back entrance on the river side — I'd put one there, if I were building a factory. And my family's built plenty of factories in England. I know all about it." Which was almost true. Uncle Chester had invested in a weaving factory, back before the turn of the century.

"We cannot do it three ways at once," said Marie. "Disguise will be the easiest way to get in and look for the doctor."

"And where are we going to get three German uniforms? Plus, you're a girl. And we don't speak German. How many times do I have to say that?" Rupert argued.

The major leaned away from his map and rubbed his hands over his face. "If you two don't stop bickering and listen to what it is that we're going to be doing, I'm locking you both in the barn and throwing snakes in through the windows."

“It’s wintertime; they’re all asleep,” said Rupert.

“I WILL WAKE THEM UP,” roared the major, to which both Rupert and Marie hissed at him to be quiet.

As the hours ticked by, there were only three things that everyone could agree on: One was that they find the doctor, and two was that they bring him home. Three was that the other two Cahills were stupid and slow and utterly incapable of an intelligent thought. “Let’s just get on with it,” said the major. And then they went. Back through the woods and to the stream and the brook and the river, all by the light of a waning moon.

“This way now,” said Marie, taking them down a deer path that Rupert hadn’t seen before. This led to the marshy edge and across a flat and rocky strip where the water slowed and it didn’t seem so deep. “We can cross here.”

The water was bright silver under the moon. “You’re daft,” said Rupert. “They’ll see us. How very like a Janus to not think things through.”

“*Tais-toi*, Davenport,” Marie snarled. “I am growing tired of your attitude, too.”

“Quiet,” Major Thompson hissed. Across the way, over the sound of water, they heard the sound of voices.

“That’s German,” said Rupert. And it was. “You led us right into the Germans!”

Marie pursed her lips and then scowled. But Major Thompson held up a hand and the other two froze. The German soldiers had turned toward them. Rupert didn’t think they could see the Cahills — it was too dark and they were hidden by the trees — but they all froze anyhow.

“*Wer ist es?*” called one of the soldiers.

Marie pressed her hands over her mouth, like she was afraid that she wasn’t in control of any noises that would come out. Major Thompson fingered the gun at his belt. Rupert had seen guns before, of course. Hunting ones, and then the artillery and the guns at the front. But he had never seen the faces or heard the voices, up close, of the enemy soldiers that they’d shot at. This soldier had blond hair and he spoke with a slight lisp. It seemed wrong to kill a person once you knew what color their hair was and whether or not they had a lisp.

“*Es ist nichts. Es ist nur ein tier,*” said the German soldier’s companion. He waved the other one over, and they settled down to a game of cards.

“They think we’re an animal,” said Marie.

“Two-thirds right,” said Rupert.

“Well, we can’t go this way now,” hissed Major Thompson. “Some kind of help you are.”

“I am,” Marie snapped back. “How should I know that they would be here?”

“Your whole reason for being here is that you said you knew things,” snarled the major.

“Quiet!” said Rupert. “Obviously, crossing here isn’t going to work. We’re going to have to find another place.”

“Follow me,” said Major Thompson. He pointed downstream, toward an old wooden bridge, and then wasted no time leaping silently through the forest. For such a large man, the major was remarkably agile. Marie and Rupert followed, slower and suspicious.

The water under the bridge was ripping past much faster than it had been a little farther upstream. “We’ll go across with the bridge,” said the major.

“They’ll see us if we do that, you idiot,” hissed Marie. “We should go back down and cross over the river. We can handle two or three guards. It is no problem.”

“We’re not going *over* the bridge,” said Major Thompson, as if this idea were pure genius. “We’re going under it.”

And that was just about the stupidest thing that Rupert had ever heard. But Major Thompson didn’t give them any time to question his decision. He went right over to the supports holding up the bridge. It was a web of wet and cold logs, crossing one another the whole way over. Rupert had an uneasy feeling about this. How very like a Tomas, to pick the most impossible way across a bridge. No one could do this and make it over alive. But Major Thompson grasped a log and climbed up into the trusses.

Rupert shook his head. Marie was already plowing ahead, muttering something in French. Rupert didn’t need a translation — he could get the gist of it from her tone.

Rupert grimaced and put his hands to the supports. And he began to hoist himself up into the dark, wet space beneath the bridge. The wood was cold and covered in icy patches. His hands slid numbly over the wood, and he tried to ignore the splinters and slime. He was shaking with tension, hoping above anything that he didn’t fall. The water would sweep him away and then he would die a no one, washed up on the side of a nowhere river.

Major Thompson was already on the other side, urging Marie and Rupert to move faster. Rupert gritted his teeth. Of course it was easy for the major — but for those of

them who weren't hulking monsters capable of superhuman physical feats, it was going to take just a moment more.

Every muscle in Rupert's body strained to hold tight to the wooden beams. Beneath him, the river splashed and sprayed icy water onto his clothes, and his hands prickled and burned with what he hoped was not frostbite. Overhead, he could hear footsteps and horse steps and the gravelly rumble of the few cars that came and went.

It was terrifying. But at the same time, he got a thrill from it. If he could risk taking a hand away from the bridge, he'd thumb his nose at those stupid soldiers who thought they were smart and skilled enough to mess with the Cahill family and get away with it.

On the far side of the river, the major and Marie helped Rupert shimmy down the last support beam without making a splash. Knee-deep in icy rushes, they crouched and waded toward shore. Spotlights shone down from the factory and swooped around, casting light on corners that wanted to stay in shadow.

There was a moment on the German side of the river when all three Cahills looked at one another with expectation.

"Right, then," said the major. "Guess I'm going this way," he said, pointing around toward the north wall. Marie and Rupert made no motion to go with him.

"You can't expect us to follow," said Rupert. "No one except you, Major, can climb a wall. And no one but Marie can speak German enough to get through the door. We'll do what I say, and we'll find a better way in. It was stupid to come this far without a plan!"

"Shhh!"

Two soldiers rounded the corner, joking with each other and laughing. The trio ducked deep into the rushes, trying to hold as still as possible. Rupert's belly rolled. Not only were they so close — they were *laughing*? What could they possibly have to laugh at?

"What are they saying, Marie?" said the major.

Marie squinted while she listened. "Do you know the difference between the alphorn and the recorder? The alphorn burns longer."

"What?"

"It is funnier in German."

"Shhh!"

They hunched down lower, until the voices faded.

“On three,” said the major, “we make a run north.”

“*Non!*” said Marie. “You are not listening. You will be caught; your way is *stupide, bestiale*.”

Rupert squinted. “What’s that?” he said, pointing. It was a grate at the bottom of the factory with a ditch running through it and down to the river. “We’ll go in that way. It’s not guarded at all.”

Both Marie and the major looked where he was pointing. “*Peut-être*,” said Marie.

“On three,” the major said again.

“*Je ne veux pas*. I will go that way,” said Marie, and she pointed back toward the grass.

“What will you do that way?” asked Rupert. Marie pulled her shawl over her head.

“I have come to find my brother,” she said. “*Hast du ihm gesehen?*” She was very convincing as a German farm girl, but Rupert still shook his head. It wouldn’t work.

“Fine!” spat the major. “Let’s just everyone do things their own way. And then we’ll see who was right. Yes?”

“*Oui. C’est ci bon*.”

“Wait a minute,” said Rupert. Even *he* knew that wasn’t a good idea, and he was typically all for getting all of the glory for himself. But the major was not listening.

“One,” said the major. “Two. Three!”

Marie slipped off to the right, disappearing seamlessly into the darkness. The major hefted himself up onto the bank and took off at a jog. Rupert’s stomach flopped again. He was alone. He usually did well alone. But he felt, in this moment, *vulnerable*. There was no one to look to, no one to fall back on. And though he was loath to admit it, even to himself, Rupert had always relied on other people being there to catch him. But now it was just him — and whatever happened to him was his responsibility. He had to do something. He couldn’t stay there in the wet. So he went his own way, creeping up the bank of the river toward the ditch and the grate. Up against the factory wall, the weeds were soggy and high, and the ground was boggy. He tried not to take very deep breaths, and only through his mouth — the smell was something awful.

The grate itself was rusty and old — he shook at it, and it wobbled back and forth in his hands. If they’d brought bolt cutters or some other sort of tool, they could easily break the old crossbars and slip in.

But then, goose bumps swept over Rupert's neck and arms. He could feel them, even through the layers of his uniform and the soggy coat and his scarf. It was a prickle, like someone was watching him from behind, from down by the water.

Slowly, Rupert looked over his shoulder. And there, in the bit of moonlight that had broken through the clouds, a man in black stood watching him. He was tall, with a long coat, a hat pulled down low over his face, and a walking staff in his hand.

He couldn't breathe. The Madrigal. Albert's Madrigal. Fear seized him, like an icy iron clamp around his throat. He was looking into the face of a Madrigal, into the face of evil, of chaos. It would be the last thing he ever saw.

Rupert was frozen in place, his hands digging into the rusty grate. Blood roared through him, as if it were trying to complete as many laps around his body as possible before he died. As if his whole being were trying to squeeze in just one more little bit of living before all was over. But at least if he died, he would die a Lucian.

So he did what a Lucian would do. He lied.

"You can't stop us," he said. "I'm not afraid of you."

"*Gehe*," said the Madrigal. He swept his arm out toward the river. "*Gehe hin und sündige hinfort nicht mehr.*"

Rupert didn't know what to do. He didn't know what that meant, and he didn't understand what the Madrigal wanted from him.

The popping of gunfire erupted around the corner, and Rupert didn't really have time to think about translating German anymore. The Madrigal turned quickly in the direction of the cracking of the guns, and Rupert took that opportunity to make a break for it back toward the river. He ran like he was the one being shot at, and he tried to ignore the great *splash* upstream.

At the river's edge, he saw something bobbing and flailing along with the current — Marie.

"*Aidez-moi!*" she was gasping as she came nearer and nearer. Rupert spun around, looking for something to use to help. There, on the grass, was the Madrigal's walking stick. Rupert was loath to touch it, but he grabbed the stick and looked for Marie again. She was farther toward the French bank than the Belgian, so Rupert took a deep breath and ran full force across the top of the bridge. The company that had been crossing was past; they were headed toward the north side of the building, their guns out.

The major. Rupert's stomach went cold. But he couldn't think about that right now. There was another Cahill, and this one was right in front of him. Back in France, Rupert skidded down the slippery bank toward the river again. He waded out waist-deep into the water.

"Grab hold!" he fiercely whispered, hoping Marie would see him, would grab for the stick. She did, but she didn't stop. The river kept sweeping her downstream, toward the north. And if Rupert didn't catch her, she'd go right past the guards. If the water didn't drown her, they wouldn't hesitate to shoot her. But she held on. Rupert dug his heels into the silt and pulled and pulled until Marie made it close enough to find her feet and the two of them could push each other back up onto shore.

"*Merci, merci,*" Marie kept saying, grabbing Rupert by the face and kissing one cheek and then the other, over and over again. "*Merci mille fois, mon cousin.*"

"I know, I know, you're welcome," said Rupert. "Marie, I get it! You're welcome!" Rupert wiped his cheeks with a wet sleeve. "Where's the major? Have you seen him?"

"*Non.* When they started shooting I began to run; I fell down the bank into the river. Is the major dead? What do we do? Do we wait for him?"

"Your face is blue," said Rupert. "You need to get to a fire and dry clothes. But we need to find the major. And I don't know which of those things should be done first."

Then, from the other side of the river, down by where the ford had been, came a great roar. Marie and Rupert hurried down to see what it was.

The major was tearing across the stony break in the rush, holding one hand to his other arm and running as fast as his legs could carry him.

Behind him, a pair of soldiers was chasing him, firing at his back as he ran.

The major made it to the French bank and threw himself into the woods. Marie pushed toward him, but Rupert held her back.

"No, they're coming across the river," said Rupert, pointing at the German soldiers. "They're coming to find the major." And the major was wounded — they'd shot him. Rupert's mind ticked like an overwound clock. "Marie, you hide. Use your German-soldier voice and tell them to come this way."

She nodded and slipped into a thicket, wrapping her arms around herself to keep from shivering. And then Rupert braced himself.

"*Komm!*" Marie yelled. "*Folge mich!*"

"Good," Rupert whispered.

“Now what?” she hissed back. But Rupert shushed her, and waited. He heard the two soldiers coming closer and held very still in the darkness, listening for every snapped twig and every swiped tree.

Almost. Almost. “Find the major and get back to the barn,” Rupert whispered to Marie. And then he saw the gleam of the gun in the thin moonlight.

“*Anhalten!*” one of the soldiers snapped. And Rupert started to run. Trees snagged at him and his boots crunched loudly over the underbrush, but that was the point. He needed to make noise, to be seen just enough to give Marie and the major time to make it back to the barn. Then he’d find his way back to the river himself.

That was the plan. Except he could hear the soldiers behind him, shouting and stomping, and maybe it was his imagination, but were they closer? He couldn’t tell if they were gaining on him or if he was only afraid that they were. Rupert thought this must be what the fox felt like in the hunt. Except the fox very rarely asked for it.

Rupert zigzagged through the trees, looping around toward the river again. His throat was dry from the cold and he could hardly breathe anymore — his legs were sore and his lungs burned like they were coated in ice. Ahead, there was a mammoth tree, and Rupert ducked behind it. He would have to hide now. He couldn’t outrun the soldiers.

He slipped himself into a split in the trunk. It wasn’t large enough for him to fit completely inside, but a good half of his torso could. He curled his hands into the dirt and ducked his chin, hoping that his dark hair and dark overcoat would help him disappear. He tried very hard to quiet his breathing, to still those ragged breaths that he sucked in to fill his aching lungs. He shivered — his clothes were wet, and his teeth were chattering, so he curled his lips in around them to keep them from making noise. They were coming.

“*Ruhig, ruhig . . .*” said the one with the lisp. “*Komm raus jetzt.*”

“*Ist er hier? Ich habe ihn nicht hören.*”

Rupert wished he knew what they were saying. Did they see him? Were they coordinating their attack? Or did they count him as lost?

They stepped around the tree, and Rupert could see a blond head shining in the moonlight. The one with the lisp took a step forward, and Rupert could feel his overcoat tug. The soldier was stepping on his coat. Rupert stopped breathing; he wished that he could stop his heart, just for a moment, so it would be quiet and not give him away.

In the distance, a twig snapped and an owl called out.

“*Schnell!*” hissed the lisp, and they slipped off quietly toward the east.

Rupert held his breath for as long as he could, taking little shallow sips of air that only filled the very tips of his lungs. And then, once he couldn’t hear them moving anymore, he let that breath out and sank against the tree. He curled his body in around itself and breathed hard into his knees. He wanted to cry out — he wanted to sob and to throw up again and to scream until his voice was lost. But he just took a moment. He collected his breath. And then, with a shaking body and a light head, he stood up. He followed the sound of the river. And he found his way back to the barn.

Marie ran out to meet him when he came to the clearing. “I thought you would be dead. Come in, come inside, and quick.” She took Rupert’s hand and practically dragged him into the barn. “I believe the major is dying. It’s quite terrible.”

“I am not *dying*,” said the major. He was leaning against a mound of hay, and his face was pale and clammy. His left sleeve was covered in blood, and so was most of the rest of him. It made Rupert’s stomach turn. “It’s nothing but a flesh wound. Don’t hover around me; back off, back off. Marie, I said don’t hover!” He looked up at Rupert. “And what you did, you idiot, was one of the stupidest things that I’ve ever seen a soldier do. Thank you.”

Rupert didn’t know what to say to that. He felt almost bashful. So instead, he said, “This looks awful.”

“That’s because you’re green, Davenport. Now man up. Pull yourself together. Get a bit of water on the thing and half the damage will go away,” growled the major. Rupert did as he was told, and Marie paced back and forth.

“I’m not going to have to, erm, sew this shut, am I?” said Rupert, wrinkling his nose at the thought.

“I should hope not!” said the major, who tried to shoot to his feet but failed with a groan. “Don’t you dare!” Rupert almost smiled. He couldn’t be so close to dying if he were that afraid of a needle.

“Did someone say something about sewing?” said Marie, coming over with a threaded needle. Rupert lifted an eyebrow. “One should never leave home without a needle and thread.”

The major went from pale to green. “No. No!” He threw his good arm in front of his face and turned away. Marie and Rupert laughed, until Marie turned to Rupert.

“It’s just a flesh wound!” Rupert said in a mock deep voice.

“I don’t sound like that!” said the major.

“*Absolument* you do!”

The major was trying very hard not to laugh, but the corners of his mouth were twitching uncontrollably and it didn’t take long to break him. They laughed until they were gasping, and until the gravity of the situation settled back down on them. And then they were all quiet.

“So,” said the major. “What happens next?”

“They saw me as I fell,” said Marie. “And they saw you, Major, because they shot at you.”

“Yes, Marie. That’s very astute. Davenport?” said the major. “What luck did you have at the river?”

Rupert started to talk, but his mouth went completely dry. The Madrigal. Should he tell them? What good or ill would that cause?

“Not much,” said Rupert. “We’d need tools and things to get through. But even so, we can’t go across the river. They’ll be on the lookout for us now.”

They all fell quiet again. Rupert didn’t want to say anything about the Madrigal. Maybe he should, but if they were going to go a different way, perhaps it wouldn’t matter? Mostly dry and somewhat fed, the group settled down to their hay as the clock struck two.

“Marie, what does ‘*Gehe hin und sündige hinfort nicht mehr*’ mean?” Rupert asked.

“Go,” she said. “Go, and sin no more. *Pourquoi?*”

Rupert swallowed the dry lump in his mouth.

“No reason,” he said.



In the middle of the night, Rupert awoke in the hay, covered in a clammy, cold sweat. He scrambled to his feet, breathing heavily and spinning around. He was dizzy and dazed and he knew, he *knew*, that someone had just been there. He could feel the sudden absence, like a shadow hanging in the air. He looked at the hay, but he was rubbish at tracking and so he had no idea if there were any footprints there. The door was still shut and the lantern was still where they had left it, turned down to a low haze in the center of the barn floor. But someone *had* been there, Rupert could feel it.

Or maybe he had dreamed it.

His dream. Black shadows everywhere — over the forest, the trenches, the barn. They had crept up over the horizon and sucked up everything, leaving the entire countryside in darkness. Madrigals.

It had been a dream. But he couldn't shake the feeling that they had been *here*.

He looked around. Everything seemed normal. Marie was curled in the hay like a cat, and the major was snoring. In the distance, church bells were ringing, and for the life of him, Rupert couldn't figure out why.

He stepped outside. The air was cold and crisp; heavy gray clouds laden with snow had moved in while they slept, and the tingle of expectation lingered in the air. Rupert felt it, too, crawling over his skin and making his hair bristle.

He had, in that moment, never felt more alive, or more aware of the world around him. The cold had stripped everything down to its most basic stuff; he thought he could feel each piece of the air as it blew past his cheeks. The church bells stopped, and there was a loud silence. There was no gunfire, no sound of canons or artillery. Just quiet.

Rupert wondered if everyone could hear the silence. He imagined that the whole of the battlefield came to a halt, that the ships in the Channel hung in the water, that Mother and Father back in England even paused in their dreaming. It was just for a moment; the church bells began to ring again. Even so, Rupert had felt it.

It wasn't about Clues and Lucians anymore. Not wholly, anyway. It wasn't even about Rupert and Albert. The moment of quiet was gone, but he craved it again. He craved that peace, and he wanted it not just for himself, but for the battlefield and for the ships and for Mother and Father and the rest of them. War, he thought, was not good for a person. And if the Madrigals were going to try and wage war, then the Cahills would have to stop fighting amongst themselves long enough to wage peace. And they'd start by rescuing the Ekat.

They'd go again tonight. They'd risk their lives again to try and prevent catastrophe.

It was funny, he thought, this family of his. They were capable of such great, beautiful things. His cousins and aunts and uncles and grandparents had built castles and cities, painted and sculpted the most beautiful works in the world, conquered mountains, and delved into the mysteries of the universe.

But it would be foolish, and a lie, to pretend that they didn't have blood on their hands — all of them. Their squabbles and ambitions had chipped away at humanity

as much as they had added to it, tossing around everyday people between them like the waves and wind toss grains of sand.

Rupert had always felt that this was the natural order of things. That they who were exceptional should do the important things and everyone else should just sit tight while those with capabilities sorted the heavy lifting. That all of the non-Cahills were just foot soldiers and pawns in a greater game. Now, he thought, that seemed so foolish.

“You’re up early,” said the major, stepping outside from the barn.

“You were snoring,” said Rupert, not wanting, yet, to tell anyone about the Madrigals or his nightmare. “It makes it hard to sleep. Do you know why the church bells are ringing? Do you think the war is over?”

“No,” said the major. “The tide can’t have turned so quickly. And if the Germans had won, we can assume the French wouldn’t be ringing their bells. I don’t know.”

“Is there coffee left?” asked Rupert.

“We can check,” said the major, and they started to walk back inside. But the major stopped in his tracks. “It’s December 24. The bells,” he said. “It’s Christmas Eve.”



At dusk, Rupert, Marie, and Major Thompson left the barn and headed back toward the trenches. They couldn’t cross at the shallows along the river again. When they had gone to check on it, they’d found a dozen men at the bridge, and more lined up along the banks.

“*Alors*,” said Marie. “We are doomed.”

“We’re not doomed,” said Rupert. “We’ve just got to think about things a different way.” Rupert paused. He couldn’t believe he was about to suggest such a mad plan — his hands started to shake at the thought of it. But no matter how frightened he was, it was the Ekat that mattered. “We’ll go up through the trenches and across no-man’s-land. Marie, you’ll help us find the best way into the factory. Once we’re inside and we see what we’re up against, the major will tell us where to go and we’ll search for the Ekat. No matter what, we stick together. We’ll do better that way. We’ll find the Ekat, and we’ll bring him back to safety.”

It was a practically impossible plan, and their chances of failing were astronomical. So it was perfect for a bunch of Cahills.

Marie kept Rupert's extra uniform (and teased him appropriately about the silk linings before admitting that it did make things more comfortable, and warmer), and tucked her braids up under a cap. The major lent them legitimacy as they snuck back toward the trenches. No one would question the two young privates with an officer.

Rupert peeked over the top of the trench — the German line was hardly thirty yards away. If all was quiet, he could hear them talking and yelling to one another.

"There's a break in their lines there," said the major, peering across with him and pointing to a gap to the left. "We'll get through there."

Rupert opened his mouth — the "gap" wasn't more than three yards across and blocked with pikes and coils of wire. But he closed it without saying a word. The major knew about these things. Rupert had to trust him.

He jumped back down to the bottom of the trench, and Rupert followed.

"All right," said the major. "We go on three. Both of you — you keep your heads down, you move quickly. If anyone goes down, the other two have to keep moving. You hear me? You keep moving."

Rupert nodded, though it felt wrong. Could he just leave Marie or the major to die? A week ago, he would have. No questions asked. He might not have even felt guilty about it.

"Two," the major was saying. Rupert snapped back to attention. The major watched the moon. As soon as it drifted behind the thick clouds, he called three, and was going up and over the side of the trench. Rupert followed, with Marie right behind.

They moved quickly. They hopped over pits and craters made by mortar shells, and sidestepped the bodies that had died only recently, left in the open air because there was no chance to retrieve them.

"Hold back!" the major hissed. Rupert and Marie froze.

Ahead, small lights were cropping up along the German lines. First one, flickering in the darkness, and then another a little farther on. And then, all at once, there were what looked like hundreds, like tiny stars had come falling to earth and landed along the lines.

"Guns?" said Marie. Rupert shrugged the slightest bit. He was afraid to move, lest they saw him.

But no, they weren't guns. "Candles," said Rupert. Dozens of candles, reaching out through the darkness in their own small ways. "What are they doing?" Rupert asked.



It was slow at first — just one lone voice in the dark. But it was deep and beautiful, like good earth. It stood alone, ringing out in the night with the force of dozens of church bells. And then, from the trenches behind Rupert, came a soft tenor, and it drifted out into the night air like falling snow. One sang in German and one in English, but neither cared and both knew what the other said — what the other meant.

Rupert looked around behind him. The English soldiers had lined the lip of their trench with as many candles and lanterns as they could muster up as well. The light didn't reach far, but Rupert could see the pale, half-smiling faces of dozens of soldiers peering out across the lines. Caught out there in the middle of it, Rupert felt afloat in a sea of fallen stars.

One by one, new voices and new languages joined the singing. The sounds of the English and the German and the French songs mingled together in the air over no-man's-land like a great net, like threads all twining together. Rupert thought if the stars did fall that night, each one would be caught up before it could reach the ground. They would hang down over the field and shine over them. The light would chase out the darkness of the war.

"Monsieur Major?" whispered Marie. "Are you crying?"

"No!" said the major, and then he snuffled. Marie moved over and took the major's hand, and then Rupert's. Together, the three stood quietly and let the night happen around them.

"You don't shoot!" called out one of the Germans. And then one of the German soldiers pitched something over the side of his trench. The three Cahills flinched; Rupert drew his arms up over his face. But instead of exploding, the mortar bounced along until Rupert saw it wasn't a mortar at all. It was a ball.

"*Wie bitte? Was nennst du es?*" said the German. "*Ah, ja. Danke.* Football!"

A few English heads popped up at that. And then, slowly, with some trepidation, the men began to climb out. The Germans were just as thin and dirty as the English and French soldiers, and they shivered just as much. They looked no different, save for their clothes. Rupert wet his lips and watched with his breath kept inside of him while the first German and Englishman came up to each other.

"You want to pick sides, then?" said the English soldier. And the German nodded. Others were coming out of the trenches with stretchers, come to gather their fallen

countrymen and to give them a holy and peaceful burial.

“Come on,” said Marie, nodding toward the break in the German line. She was right. They still had things to do, though Rupert didn’t want to move for anything in the world. But there was a line to cross, a factory to sneak into, an Ekat to rescue, and a world to save. It was a busy Christmas.



They slipped past the soldiers and the lines, and then crept back into the shadows. Marie led them up a road, and ahead they could see the black fingers of the factory again.

“We’ll go to Davenport’s sewer grate,” said the major, and Marie nodded. Rupert’s mouth dried out.

“Wait,” said Rupert. He thought of the Madrigal, lying in wait for them to come. He wanted to use his own idea, but what if it all went wrong? The other two turned and looked at him, puzzled. “Isn’t there another way?”

“Non,” said Marie. “It was a good idea. And no one saw you.”

“But we’ll need something to break in with,” said Rupert.

“Like these?” said the major, holding up a pair of bolt cutters.

“Where did you get those?”

“I pay attention when you talk,” said the major. “I came prepared.”

Rupert’s stomach twisted cold. The Madrigal had seen him. But could he tell them now, when he had waited so long? What if they thought he was keeping something from them intentionally? What if they thought he was trying to lead them into trouble? That might have been the case once, but it wasn’t anymore.

“Someone did see me,” Rupert said. “Someone did, and it was — I know it was a Madrigal.”

Marie gasped, and Rupert thought that the major growled.

“I don’t know if he’ll be there again tonight. But you should know.”

The other two were quiet for a moment more.

“Well,” said Marie finally. “It’s three against one. I like our odds.”

The major nodded in agreement. “If the Madrigals are involved with the Ekat — we still have to go. Show the way to your sewer grate, and we’ll meet whatever comes.”

Once at the factory, they watched from the woods again and waited until the German guards made their rounds. This was their last chance — there would be no

other opportunities. The soldiers here didn't know that games and carol singing had broken out in the trenches; to them, it was still wartime. Rupert very much doubted that a "Happy Christmas" would save their lives if they were caught.

The major gave the signal. And then, they were off.

They darted across the lawn just as the snow began to fall. Marie and Rupert crouched in the ditch as the major cut through the rusty grate, revealing a long tunnel. They had to walk slowly so as not to splash in the muck that ran down to the ditch. The air was cold and damp and small around them. But ahead was another grate, which led into a room with a boiler and a great series of pipes and vents.

"There are so many rooms and hallways. We should each take a floor — we will never find him otherwise," said Marie.

"No," said Rupert. "We stay together. We can't do everything alone."

"Then where do we go first?" said Marie. She looked to the major, and Rupert did, too.

"Well," said the major. "We start at the beginning." And he led them out into the hall.

It was dark, with only a few overhead lights hanging every few yards. The floor was made of stones and was covered in a fine layer of damp. Rupert had a hard time remembering when he had ever been in a place so hauntingly dismal. The major motioned them on, and Rupert led them down the hall on their tiptoes.

At the end of the hall they found a door, which led to a staircase. Rupert faltered. In a stairway, there was nowhere to run or to hide. Anything that they came across, they would have to face.



The trio quietly skittered up the stairs, and Rupert, at the front, cracked the door at that level. A squad of soldiers was marching down the hall, coming at them from the left. Rupert jerked away from the light, hoping no one had noticed the crack or any quiver from the door. He held his finger to his lips as the sound of the footsteps grew closer and closer. Rupert, Marie, and the major all waited with their breaths bottled tight inside of them, their muscles tense and frozen and not trembling the slightest bit. The tiniest sigh or the softest scuffle would be their end — the end of their mission — the end of the world that they wanted to save and protect.

The uniform marching came closer and closer, until Rupert was sure they were going to come to the stairs and march right down to the basement. But they passed, and Rupert could breathe again. And he could peek out again, too.

“We’ll go right out of here,” Rupert said. “There’s a doorway you can hide in. I’ll trot ahead to the corner and take a peek around.” He didn’t know what he was looking for — an abundance of guards? A dungeon with cells and shackles? Signs that read PRISONER’S SCIENCE LAB? — but he thought he would know it when he saw it.

“But if they see you!” said Marie.

“You can’t risk that,” said the major.

“Cousins,” said Rupert. “What are Lucians best at? No one will catch me. I’m sure of it.” Lucians were also, it should be said, best at lying. And Rupert’s confidence was almost entirely a lie. But he firmly believed that thinking a thing made it so.

They left the stairwell and scurried like mice caught in the light toward the next doorway. There, Rupert caught his breath. And stepped back out into the hall.

His heart was beating terribly fast in his chest. Thrills ran all over him, like a spider’s footprints, beginning behind his sternum and swelling out through his body.

He edged out toward the corner, keeping as much of himself as possible pressed against the wall. Around that corner, a cluster of guards stood outside a door. They looked bored and miserable. Of course, it was Christmas Eve. And they stood there, away from their own families, in a dank factory, guarding something that probably had very little value to them individually, but that they had to kill to protect.

Guarding something. Someone? Rupert edged back along the wall toward the others.

“I think we’ve found him,” said Rupert. His heart jumped and then squeezed in upon itself. Step one was done. They were on their way to success. “There are at least a dozen guards around the corner. We need to look in that room. But how do we get past the guards?”

“*Ich weiß*,” said Marie in her deep German soldier’s voice. If he weren’t so scared and on edge, Rupert might have laughed. “Soldiers listen to anything someone tells them. No offense, Major.”

“Call them to a Christmas treat,” said Rupert.

“But not all of them,” chimed in the major. “They’ll get suspicious if you call all of them away from their object.”

“How many should I leave there?” asked Marie.

“Two or three. That’ll be okay for a quick nip or snack break,” said the major.

Marie nodded. She rubbed the front of her throat and then she shouted a long string of German. “*Schnell! Schnell!*” she finished. “*Letztere bekommt kein kuchen!*”

“You sound terrifying when you do that,” said Rupert.

“*Merci!*” said Marie.

They hadn’t counted on which way the soldiers would march to their treat, though, and so there was a mad scramble back to the stairway where they had hidden before. The major just barely managed to get the door shut before the soldiers rounded the corner, jovial about their upcoming sweets.

As soon as the slightest hush of quiet swept back over the floor, the trio set out. They only had until the soldiers reached the kitchens and realized there were no treats. After that, they might take a moment to see who had played a joke on them, but once it all was sorted, the alarms would ring and everyone would know that something was amiss in the factory.

At the end of the hall, Rupert peeked again. They had left three guards. One of them stood outside of the door with a deadly serious look on his face. One was marching toward the other end of the hall. And one was so near that Rupert could have reached out and touched him.

The major switched places with Rupert. And in one swift motion, he’d grabbed the soldier and dragged him around the corner.

The soldier was shocked for a moment, but that one moment was all the major needed. Before the soldier could cry out or begin to truly fight back, the major had an arm around his neck and one more pressed against his mouth. In moments, the German soldier was sinking to his knees, his eyes lolling back in his head as he slipped into unconsciousness.

Marie was aghast.

“He’s not dead,” said the major. “I’m not about to kill someone on Christmas.”

The major pulled the uniform off of the soldier, leaving him in his long underwear.

“Give it to me,” said Rupert. The major shook his head.

“Give it to me,” Rupert insisted. “It won’t fit you. And they’ll be able to tell Marie’s a girl. Don’t look at me like I’m daft, Major, we don’t have time for that.”

The major passed the uniform over to Rupert. “You be careful. At the slightest hint of trouble, I’m coming around that bend.”

“You won’t,” said Rupert. “You won’t risk the mission. I’ll take a look around and give a signal when it’s time for you two to make a move. Marie, turn around.”

Marie politely covered her eyes as Rupert shimmied out of his own clothes and into the German soldier’s uniform.

Rupert steeled himself, adopted his most German posture, and stepped around the corner. He felt as if he were stepping out onstage without knowing any of his lines. But instead of booing him, his audience would kill him. Both of the German guards turned to look at him. The uniform was too big on him, and he stood there, gangling and awkward and certain that in two seconds they were about to shoot him.

But apparently the uniform did the trick. They both looked past him after a moment, and went back to their own work. Rupert hefted the soldier’s gun up onto his shoulder and watched as the other guard at the end of the hall turned and began to march toward him. Rupert waited until he passed, then followed.

In the center of the hall, right before the door, the other marching soldier put his hand out to stop Rupert. Rupert’s stomach dropped into the pit of his stomach, and his breath stopped.

“*Wie spät ist es?*” asked the soldier.

Rupert panicked. He didn’t know what that meant or how to answer or how to do anything in that moment but to gape like a fish. It was the Madrigal from the grate.

“You!” Rupert blurted. He gasped, audibly, like he had just been slapped. Like all of the wind had been sucked out of him. The darkness from his dream swept over him, giving him chills and sweats at the same time, and he almost lost the grip on his gun. But the Madrigal just smiled.

“*Wat?*” said the one in front of the door.

“*Nein,*” said the Madrigal, gesturing back to himself. “*Fritz.*”

Suddenly, from around the corner came a great crash. The guard at the door jumped, but Rupert and the Madrigal kept staring at each other.

I know why you’re here, Rupert wanted to say. But it won’t work. We’re here. Me and Marie and the major, and it’s one against three, even if it is the army against three. And you can’t stop us, and we’re going to take the Ekot back and you can’t have him.

But instead, the guard at the door barked something to the Madrigal in German and sent him off to investigate. Rupert watched him go. Marie and the major would handle it. He waited for the sounds of a scuffle, but none came.

Rupert decided that now was as good a time as any. “Well,” said Rupert, turning to face the other guard. “It’s been quite a night.”

The German soldier opened his mouth in surprise at the sound of English, but at that moment, the major and Marie came barreling around the corner. Rupert took advantage of the surprise and swung the butt of his gun around, knocking the soldier to the ground. The major was there in a moment. He’d torn Rupert’s beautiful uniform to pieces, and with them he bound and gagged the soldier.

They burst into the room.

It was like a scene from a madman’s nightmare. Beakers and cauldrons boiled over Bunsen burners, and strange liquids and powders filled glass vials and stone mortars. The electricity was frizzing in and out, making the whole room glow in an undulating yellow and orange haze.

“Dr. Woolsey!” the major called out.

A little man in a yellow sweater jumped to his feet. He had white hair that looked as if he had tried to fix the electricity himself — and failed. It stood out at all ends and it looked like he hadn’t shaved in days.

“Very, very,” said the doctor. His hands were shaking as he took a handkerchief from his cuff and cleaned his glasses. “Visitors. Oh, my. Where is the kettle? I don’t — I can’t seem to —” He pushed his glasses up his nose. “Welcome to Oxford, lads.”

“They’ve driven him mad,” said Marie. “The poor old man.”

“Visitors, visitors. There are, erm, there is vermin. Please find the housekeeper, Jim.”

But Rupert wasn’t paying attention to them anymore. He was too distracted looking around the room. The doctor must have been driven mad, but how? And by what? Great Vs were scratched into everything — the tops of the tables, the covers of workbooks, even the walls.

“Dr. Woolsey, what are all of the Vs for?” Rupert asked. But as soon as he did, the doctor went deathly pale and shrunk back into himself.

“Vermin!” he barked. “Vile vermin!”

Rupert touched one of the letters carved into the doctor’s wooden table, running his finger along the sharp splinters. “You can’t be this scared of mice,” said Rupert. “What does V mean?”

“Very. Very badly behaved,” said Dr. Woolsey. “Never seen such badly behaved students.”

“Come on,” said the major. “We don’t have a lot of time. Doctor, I’m sorry, but we’re going to ruin your hard work.” The major picked up a chair and prepared to throw it at the laboratory setup.

“Oh!” The doctor threw his hands up over his face and cowered.

“Wait!” said Rupert, grabbing the chair from the major. “You can’t just go and do that. You have to think about things first. Two of the chemicals could explode if they touch each other. Doctor, what’s here?”

“A spot of tea, I think,” said Dr. Woolsey. Rupert doubted that.

“Marie, you said they’ve started making the gas here?” said Rupert. “And before that, it was, what? A dying factory?”

“*Oui*,” said Marie.

“Quickly, Davenport, quickly!” said the major.

Rupert was going to go as fast as he could. But delicate things took time. You couldn’t just crash a bunch of things together and hope they didn’t create toxic fumes, or fire, or both. And it didn’t help that he didn’t understand any of Dr. Woolsey’s notes or labels. They were scrawled in something that looked like spider tracks, and half of them were in German.

One white powder was labeled NATRIUM and another vial had KOHLNSTOFF scribbled onto it. A beaker of orange liquid was ORANGENSAFT.

“Time, Davenport. We haven’t got time for this!” said the major.

“None of this makes any sense!” said Rupert. “Marie!”

“I don’t know these kinds of words,” she said. Except she pointed to the orange beaker. “That is orange juice.”

Rupert took a deep breath. His hands were shaking and he could feel himself begin to sweat. He knew they didn’t have enough time. But they couldn’t leave the setup — even if no one else knew what Dr. Woolsey’s scribbles meant, it was still too dangerous. And they couldn’t destroy everything without first making sure they wouldn’t destroy themselves in the process. It took only seconds for chemicals to mix, for toxic gases to seep out into the air and up into the brain, the blood. And Rupert did not come this far to be taken down by sheer carelessness.

A bowl of green leaves on the table caught his eye. “*Strychos?*” said Rupert, turning to the doctor. “They’re making you work with strychnine?”

“What’s that?” asked Marie.

“Don’t touch it! Strychnine will kill you in minutes. Mix it with hydrochloric acid and you could kill everyone in a two-hundred-fifty-meter radius. Is this what they’re making you work on?” he asked the doctor. “And what are these?” he said, running over toward a pair of large vats in the center of the room. They were cold to the touch, with a thin layer of frost wrapped around their metal casings. The vats were sealed — and when Rupert went to lift the vent on one, Dr. Woolsey came running and yelling. Rupert stumbled backward.

“What is it?” he asked, but the doctor couldn’t answer him. Something cold, something sealed, something in a factory used to make gas. “Chlorine! There’s liquid chlorine? In both of these?” That much chlorine could wipe out half the armies on the Western Front. Rupert balled his fists in his hair, staggering backward.

“What, Davenport?” said the major. He picked up a chair. “We don’t have time for this.” And he lifted the chair to smash a table of beakers and pipettes.

“No, wait!” said Rupert, looking up. A great water pipe ran overhead — the water could neutralize the chlorine. They had to take the doctor away, and fast, but they couldn’t leave the Germans with such a stockpile of gas.

“Davenport, you have to hurry. You have to do this now.” The major looked at his wristwatch. “They’ll have figured it out by now. They’ll —”

The alarm began to wail.

“Major, you need to climb up and cut the water line,” said Rupert.

“Major, you are hurt again! You are bleeding again,” said Marie as the major ran over to the rickety service ladder that ran up to the water and steam pipes.

“I’ll be fine for now,” he said, though his face was pale and taugth. “Let’s go, Davenport.”

“Marie,” said Rupert. “You find hydrogen peroxide — like for cuts and scrapes — and sulfur. Something with sulfur. You know those words?” She nodded and went to find things. “Doctor, you wait by the door. Go!”

The major was quick like a cat, and at the top he gave the pipe a great whack with the cutters. And then another, and another, until the pipe popped out of place and a great rush of water spilled down into the room. The major skidded down and ran to the door, hefting the doctor over his shoulder.

“Go, Major! Take the doctor and get a head start,” said Rupert. The major didn’t need any more instruction than that; he dashed out the door.

Rupert swiped his arm through the growing flood on the floor and pressed the wet cloth against his nose and mouth. He figured he had about fifteen seconds. He lifted the vent on one chlorine vat, and then the other. A thick yellow-green gas rolled out, like a miniature storm slinking across the floor. The gas mixed with the water, and the water pounded it down and sucked it out of the air. But Rupert's eyes still started to water, and he ran.

"Come on," he said to Marie, who was beginning to cough even by the door. Rupert poured the hydrogen peroxide over the sulfur, threw it, and slammed the door shut. Just outside the door, the bound and gagged German guard was beginning to come to. Rupert grabbed him by the shirt and dragged him down the hall, despite the guard's muffled protests. The major was right. They'd not kill a person on Christmas Eve, even just by proxy. They had only moments until a great explosion knocked Rupert and Marie to the floor. The door blew off of its hinges and the wood shattered all over the hallway.

For Rupert, it was like being in no-man's-land again. He shot to his feet, grabbed Marie's hand, and they ran to the stairwell. The major and the doctor had come and gone. Rupert and Marie ran down the stairs as the alarm screamed and called the soldiers to action; Rupert hoped that this stairwell wouldn't be one used by all of the other people with guns rushing to see what the commotion was about.

Or the Madrigal. He didn't know where the Madrigal had gone to.

In the basement, water from the broken line was seeping down the walls. The two Cahills ran to the boiler room, and down through the grate. This time, they didn't care about splashing or making noise. The major and the doctor were waiting for them just outside. There, the air was cold and clear and clean and Rupert gulped deep breaths of it.

On the other side of the factory, chaos had swept in. A chemical fire raged in the laboratory, sirens wailed, and angry shouts in German echoed all up and down the riverside. Black smoke poured up toward the clouds, and great tongues of fire leaped into the air. The sight of it made Rupert shiver.

But they were outside. They were past the river. They were hiding in the shadows on the French side of the water, pausing for the doctor to catch his breath. Rupert sat down, too, and as soon as he did, he let out a great breath. He was shaking again, from cold and from nerves and from the shock of the explosion. But he was here and he was whole and so were the other three.

“Almost there,” said Rupert. “Let’s get going. Doctor, let the major help you. Come on.”

He stood up, and the four Cahills headed through the snow and back toward the front lines. It was still dark out; it was still Christmas Eve. They only had to cross the trenches again, and they would be safe. So they hoped for just one more miracle.



At the trench lines, the Christmas gathering was still happening. A massive game of football had broken out. It seemed that the concept of sides had vanished and no-man’s-land was full of fifty or so young men, all chasing one football. Some of the officers were sharing cups of hot coffee, and Rupert even saw one of the British soldiers giving a German man a haircut.

“Do you think this means the war will be over soon?” asked Rupert. It was hard enough to kill a person when you knew just small things about them. No one could do it after playing football, after singing carols, after sharing so much goodwill. “They can’t fight after this.”

A little farther on, a man was standing before a small crowd. He was speaking in English, but with a thick German accent.

“Is it Mass?” asked Marie. The major said he didn’t know, but he took his hat off anyway.

“Peace,” the man said. “Let there be peace upon this earth. Let there be peace upon these hearts. On this night, let us remember that man was not made to wage war. Man was not made to carry the burden of hatred. Man was made for love, for goodness and kindness. Man was made to help his neighbor, to live with a soft heart and open arms. Let us forgive, let us come together. Let us walk in peace with those who are different from us. Let us give the world as much beauty and kindness as we can offer — and, my friends, we can offer so much. We are all one,” he said. “German or English or French. We are all brothers. We are all family.”

It was Fritz. It was the Madrigal. It was the Madrigal who stood up in front of these people and proclaimed a spirit of peace and goodwill. Rupert didn’t understand. He didn’t understand how the Madrigal could say such things with such conviction, as if he actually believed them. He made *Rupert* believe them. Confusion and anger boiled in Rupert — he wanted to yell out, to demand an explanation for all of this, to call the Madrigal out as a liar and a cheat.

The Madrigal turned then, and looked Rupert in the eye.

“Merry Christmas,” said the Madrigal. “And may there be peace on earth.”



The three Cahills took Dr. Woolsey to the nurses, where the major explained that he was a British prisoner of war, just rescued. He was to be tended to, but not questioned; he was in a very delicate state. The nurses took him in with their white aprons and soft voices.

“We’ll let him sleep tonight,” said the major. “Tomorrow we’ll see if he can give us any more information on what he went through.”

“They — someone — Major,” said Rupert. “Major, it would have — Hydrochloric acid and strychnine make an ugly pair. You get just a little bit of it and it — it kills you, within minutes. If they were to, I, I don’t know, use it like the gas — they could kill everyone. Within minutes. Just minutes.” Rupert shook his head. No one needed to be able to do that. Not Madrigals, or Cahills, or Germans, or the V people — whoever they were.

“But we stopped it,” said the major. And Rupert nodded. “You did good work. You’ll sleep well tonight.”

But he couldn’t get the Madrigal out of his head. Why would a Madrigal preach peace? And why did a Madrigal let him and the others into the guarded room? Rupert wondered if it was the Cahill version of a Christmas truce — we’ll stop hunting you long enough for you to enjoy a sweet. But Rupert looked at Marie and the major and thought that maybe this, too, was a sort of Cahill Christmas truce.

“*Mes cousins*,” Marie said. “You will come to my home for Christmas dinner. We have a small goose. It will be very good. I will tell my *maman* and *papa* about it.”

“That would be delightful, Marie,” said the major. She took both of their hands and kissed their cheeks and disappeared out into the night like a ghost. The major looked Rupert up and down with a strange look. “Let’s get you a new uniform before the goodwill wears off.”

“Good plan,” said Rupert, remembering that he was dressed as a German soldier. He tried his best to cover up his regimental patches as they made their way past sleeping soldiers, men writing letters, and another group of carolers to get to the supply tents. There, Major Thompson found a standard British uniform for Rupert.

“Here you are, Special Officer,” said the major.

“Thank you,” said Rupert. But something didn’t sit right. “Major Thompson?”

“Yes?”

“I’ve a confession to make.”

“You’re not Special Officer Albert Davenport,” said the major. “Or rather, Second Lieutenant Albert Davenport.”

“No,” said Rupert.

“And you’re not even quite officially a part of His Majesty’s armed forces.”

“How did you know that?”

“It’s not hard to tell a trained soldier from an untrained one.”

“But you didn’t say anything,” said Rupert. “You just let me carry on like, like I was a part of it. You didn’t say anything.”

“It’s like I told you before,” said the major. “You’ve got to see things up close sometimes, and adapt to what you’re given. So you weren’t Albert. Well, who knows what your brother — I’m assuming that’s your brother — would have done in your place. Maybe he’d have done a bang-up job and we’d have gotten this done last night. From what I’ve heard of him in battle, I doubt it. Rumor says he whined throughout the battle of the Marne and wouldn’t stop until a general came around giving out commissions like candy.” Rupert tried not to smile at that. “Or maybe you’re the ace, kid, and he’d have walked out of my sight as soon as he found out I wasn’t just like him. Who knows?”

Rupert fingered the rough material of the uniform.

“I’m putting you on a train back to the Channel and then over to Mother England tomorrow night,” said the major. “Don’t open your mouth to complain. You came, you had your adventure, and now you’re going to go back home and ease your parents’ minds and go back to school and then, maybe when you’re old enough, you can join up for real. The army in peacetime isn’t a bad gig. But you’re going back to England — is that understood?”

“You can’t boss me around, you know,” said Rupert. “You’re not my commanding officer.”

“No, that’s true,” said the major. “But I’m your older cousin. And what I say goes.” Rupert smiled.

“Get some sleep,” said the major. “And happy Christmas Eve, Davenport.”

“To you, too,” said Rupert. The major went to find a meal and a bed. Rupert was left standing alone, between the edge of battle and the beginnings of civilian life. Peace,

the Madrigal said. And maybe he was right. With any luck, the war would be over by spring and they could all move on. They could disengage from the fear and the anger and the death and the war. Maybe there would be peace here. And maybe there would be peace at home. He borrowed a piece of paper and a pencil from a soldier nearby and sat down against a pile of supply crates.

Dear Albert, he wrote. *I hope you are safe at Christmas.* It was a start.

From the trench line, there came a shriek of laughter and then cheers as someone scored a goal. No, there wouldn't be war much longer. There would be joy, and rest, and peace. Between England and her enemies. Within the Continent. And, perhaps, within one family spread across the whole of the world. It wasn't as impossible as it seemed.

And Rupert Davenport was never wrong about anything. Mostly.

SPECIAL BONUS!



As a gift to our readers, this story includes an excerpt from *A Mutiny in Time* by James Dashner, the first book in the new time-travel adventure series, **INFINITY RING**. Keep reading for your chance to save history . . .

Prologue

DAK SMYTH sat on his favorite branch of his favorite tree, right next to his favorite friend, Sera Froste. *Not a bad way to spend a Saturday afternoon*, he thought.

Beyond the safety of the tree, there was plenty to worry about. The world was falling apart and the people in charge of things didn't seem to care. But Dak decided not to let little stuff like that bother him now.

Sera apparently agreed. "Feels good up here," she said. "Doesn't it?"

"Yeah, it sure does. Makes me kinda sad I wasn't born a monkey. Then I could live in one of these things."

Sera laughed. "You've got the personality of a monkey. And the smell. That's two-thirds of the way there, at least."

"Thanks," Dak said, as if she'd just paid him a tremendous compliment.

A soft breeze made the branches sway back and forth, just enough to soothe Dak into a partial trance. He and Sera climbed up the tree every so often when there was nothing else to do. It gave them a chance to talk, away from any distractions — distractions like adults, who complained constantly about taxes and crime rates and, in whispers, about the SQ. With all the mental static, it was a wonder Dak and Sera managed to get any thinking done. Fortunately, they were both geniuses . . . although in very different ways.

"You excited for the field trip this week?" Sera asked.

Dak looked over at her, slightly suspicious. Their class was going to a museum, full of history — which he loved — and not a whole lot of science — which was her passion. But the question seemed genuine.

"Remember my last birthday?" he asked in return. "When I got that replica of Thomas Jefferson's ascot?"

"How could I forget? You came screaming down the street like a girl who'd just found a bucket full of candy."

Dak nodded, relishing the memory. "Well, I'm even more excited about this trip."

"Gotcha. That's pretty excited."

They sat in silence for a while, Dak enjoying the breeze and the sounds of nature and the break from the rest of life. Gradually, though, he realized that Sera seemed far less relaxed. There was an unmistakable tension in her shoulders that had nothing to do with tree climbing. He followed her gaze across the yard to his front porch, where his parents had recently put up a new flag. The small flagpole affixed to the side of the house was usually used for seasonal displays — holiday flags in the winter, the forty-eight-starred U.S. flag in the long summer months.

Now, for the first time, Dak's parents had put up a stark white flag with a black symbol in its center. That symbol was a circle broken by a curve and a thunderbolt — the insignia

of the SQ.

“Don’t tell me your parents buy into all that,” Sera said, her voice solemn.

“I don’t think so. They said it’s easier this way. They’re less likely to be bothered if they just put up the flag.”

“The SQ — they make me sick,” Sera said. Dak had never heard such fierceness in her voice. “Someone has got to stand up to them eventually. Or someday it’s going to be too late.”

Dak listened to her as he stared out into the woods beyond his house. All that green, all those animals. There were parts of the world where these kinds of places had disappeared entirely. He’d read enough history to know that where the SQ went, trouble followed. He suddenly felt his own little burst of determination.

“Maybe it’ll be us who stand up,” he said. “You never know.”

“Yeah?” she answered absently.

“There’s an old saying,” Dak told her. “The times, they are a-changin’.”

“Ooh, I like that.”

“Maybe that’ll be our motto. Maybe we’ll change the times someday. Every problem has a solution, right? And our big brains have got to be good for something. What do you say?”

She looked over at him and stuck out her hand. He shook it hard.

Somewhere nearby, a bird chirped excitedly.



The Only Hope

BRINT TAKASHI stared at the monitor and tried to remember a time when he didn't know the world was about to end.

Mari Rivera, his second-in-command, sat next to him, and the way she was slowly shaking her head back and forth, she seemed to be the second most depressed person on the planet. Brint was the first.

"Well?" Mari asked. "What do you think?"

"What do I think? I think we have a global catastrophe on our hands," Brint replied. "Volcanic eruptions all along the Pacific Rim. Blizzards in parts of South America that have never even seen snow before. If we're lucky, the tropical storm brewing in the Atlantic might put out the wildfires in the Northeast."

"Look on the bright side," Mari said, her voice grim. "At least people believe we're in trouble now."

"People still believe what the SQ tells them to believe. Because fear is always more powerful than truth." He ran his fingers through his dark hair and sighed. "Aristotle would be so proud. Look what the Hystorians have been reduced to! The SQ is going to win — even if it means destroying the world."

It wasn't just the natural disasters that had him worried. Or the blackouts. Or the food shortages. There were also the Remnants. Every day when Brint went home and looked at the picture that hung above the fireplace — he and his wife sitting by a river, the sun glinting off the water behind them — he felt a disorienting twist in his head and stomach. A gnawing gap in his mind that made him extremely uncomfortable. Someone — at least one someone — was *missing* from that photo. It made no sense whatsoever, but he knew in his bones that someone was missing.

He wasn't alone in suffering these types of sensations. More people experienced Remnants with each passing day. They'd strike when you least expected them. And they could drive you crazy. Literally crazy.

Time had gone wrong — this is what the Hystorians believed. And if things were beyond fixing now, there was only one hope left . . . to go back in time and fix the past instead.

Mari did what she always did when he was inclined to whine. She ignored him and moved on to the task at hand. "What's the latest on the Smyths?" she asked. Of all the scientists the Hystorians tracked, they were the only ones who hadn't been shut down by the SQ . . . yet.

Brint pulled up their file and pointed out the latest developments. All of the Smyths' experiments, findings, data — every little thing they did in their lab each and every day — it was all being monitored by the Hystorians. Without the Smyths' knowledge, of course. Brint would be sure to apologize for that *after* they saved the world.

They both fell silent for a minute, staring at the data on the screen as if hypnotized. The Smyths were so close. If only they could figure out the missing piece in their calculations. If only they could give the Hystorians a fighting chance at carrying out Aristotle's two-thousand-year-old plan to save the world.

"It's coming, you know," Mari whispered. "Sooner than I ever thought."

Brint nodded as dread squeezed his heart. "I never would've guessed it would be in our lifetime."

Mari continued, her words like a prophecy of doom from a wrinkled old oracle.

"It's coming, all right. The Cataclysm is coming, and we'll all wish we were dead long before it kills us."



Old Man in a Coffin

DAK SMYTH was a nerd.

He'd been called worse, no doubt. Dork, geek, wimp, brainiac, pencil-pusher, dweeb, you name it. But the word that most often floated out of people's mouths when they mentioned him was *nerd*. And did he mind? No. When all those dummies who poked fun were working their tails off in thirty years, living paycheck to paycheck to buy doughnuts and milk, he'd be laughing it up in his private jet, drinking cream soda till he puked. Then he'd laugh again as his butler cleaned it up, and when that was done, he'd count all his money and eat big blocks of cheese.

(Dak Smyth was a nerd who also loved cheese. Unnaturally so. Not a winning combination, which he was the first to admit.)

On the day before the big school field trip to the Smithsonian Museum in the nation's capital of Philadelphia, Dak had to put aside his nerd-powered excitement to attend the most boring of events — an uncle's funeral. Make that great-uncle, as in Great-Uncle Frankie, a man he'd laid eyes on all of twice if you included the viewing before the funeral, which Dak certainly did. He'd looked down on an old, grizzled man who had his eyes closed, hands crossed over his chest, looking like he'd just settled down for one of the twenty naps a day the geezer was probably used to. But, according to Dak's mom — and supported by the fact that the man was lying inside a coffin — Great-Uncle Frankie was dead as a doornail.

The funeral service had been slightly boring and lasted roughly one hundred and thirty hours, but now they were finally at the family dinner that came afterward. Dozens of people who'd been boo-hooing their eyeballs out an hour earlier were laughing like overcaffeinated hyenas, stuffing their faces with a whole week's worth of SQ-rationed

food. Dak wondered whether funerals for old people always ended up being such festive affairs.

He sat at a table with a bunch of cousins, none of whom he'd ever met. They were talking about all kinds of things that he didn't care about. Like that lame show where they crown the next SQ intern. Or game five of some sports championship that was so dull Dak didn't even know which teams were playing (or what sport it was). Then some kid with a pimple the size of President McClellan's face on Mount Rushmore started talking excitedly about the latest fashion trends, namely those jeans with the pockets that made your rear end look like it was upside down. *Seriously?* Dak thought. These people couldn't possibly share the same genetics with him, could they?

Just as he decided he couldn't take any more, a sudden feeling came over him — a familiar itch that he'd learned long ago was impossible to ignore.

He *had* to share his tremendous knowledge of history, and he had to do it *now*.

Dak stood up and cleared his throat. When no one paid him any attention, he picked up his glass and tapped it loudly with his spoon until everyone in the room finally shut their yappers and looked at him.

"I just have something I'd like to say to everybody," he announced. He heard a few groans in response, but he assumed those were the old fogies, feeling aches and pains as they shifted in their seats. A quick glance at his mom showed that she'd put her head in her hands, and his dad was looking at him wide-eyed, slowly shaking his head back and forth. There was something like panic on his face.

Dak hurried to continue before somebody forced him to stop. "I know we're gathered here for a very solemn occasion. Poor Great-Uncle Frankie has gone the way of the dodo bird, soon to rot in peace. Um, I mean, rest in peace. But, um, I wanted to share something to help you all realize that things aren't as bad as they seem."

He paused to gauge people's reactions. They all seemed enraptured.

"You see," he continued, "our dear relative could've gone out the same way as Rasputin, the grand Russian mystic, in the year 1916. That poor man was poisoned, shot four times, clubbed over the head, then drowned in a river. Drowned in a river, for crying out loud! After being poisoned, shot, and clubbed! Poor fella." Dak let out a little chuckle to set the right mood. "So, as you can clearly see, Great-Uncle Frankie got off pretty easy when all is said and done."

Dak finished by pulling in a long, satisfied breath. He looked around the room and saw nothing but blank faces staring back at him. Lots of blinking.

“Thanks for listening,” he finally said. Then he held up his water glass and yelled, “Cheers!”

His mom fell out of her chair.



The next day brought the field trip he'd been looking forward to for months. For someone who loved history as much as Dak did, going to the Smithsonian was better than getting locked in a candy factory overnight. He planned to gorge himself on information.

On the bus ride there, he sat by his best friend in the whole wide world. Her name was Sera Froste, and so far no one had given them any flack about being such good friends. Well, except for the occasional “when're you gonna get married” jokes. And the “Dak and Sera, sittin' in a tree” songs.

Okay, so they'd received plenty of flack.

“What exhibits are we going to see before lunch?” Dak asked her after he'd gone over the museum's floor plan with fluorescent highlighters. “And which ones after?”

Sera looked up from the electronic book that she was reading on her SQuare tablet, fixing him with the sort of stare she usually reserved for a bug in a jar. Her long dark hair made her expression look even more severe, as if it were on display in a picture frame. “Would you relax? Let's just play it by ear, roam around. I don't know, actually *enjoy* ourselves.”

Dak's mouth dropped open. “Are you *insane*?” And he really meant it — she obviously didn't comprehend the opportunity they were about to be given. “We need to plan this to the second — I'm not taking any chance of missing something cool.”

“Oh, for the love of mincemeat,” was her only response before she returned her attention to *String Theory and Other Quantum Leaps in Quantum Physics*.

Sera was a nerd in her own right, almost nerdy enough in stature to compete with Dak himself. *Oh, who am I kidding?* Dak thought. She had him beat by a mile.

This was the girl who had recently convinced him to attend a Saturday afternoon thesis reading at the local university — “convinced” him by threatening to scream out in the middle of lunch that she was in love with him if he said no. Dak had fiercely protested because he'd wanted to see the guy at the state fair who swore he was so old that he'd been Mussolini's foot doctor during World War Two. (The man evidently had toenail clippings to prove it.) But Sera *swore* that it'd be more exciting to hear a three-hour presentation called “The Effect of Tachyon Generation on Ambient Wellsian Radiation.”

It wasn't.

Sera had finally agreed to leave the presentation early, but only because the speaker kept using the words *baryon* and *meson* interchangeably when, according to Sera, everyone knows that's not proper.

Suddenly Dak had an idea. He ran his fingers through his sandy blond hair and stared intently at his color-coded floor plan. "I guess we can skip the Hope Diamond exhibit if we're short on time. It's supposed to be cursed, which is cool. I'm not sure what it means by 'an exploration of the biogeochemical processes that give minerals their unique properties,' though. It sounds like a total snooze fest if you ask me."

"Who asked you?" said Sera, putting her SQuare down. "Let me see that map."

By the time Dak and Sera marched off the bus, Dak's heart was giddy with excitement.

They had two hours and forty-seven minutes before the earthquake that would almost kill them.

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